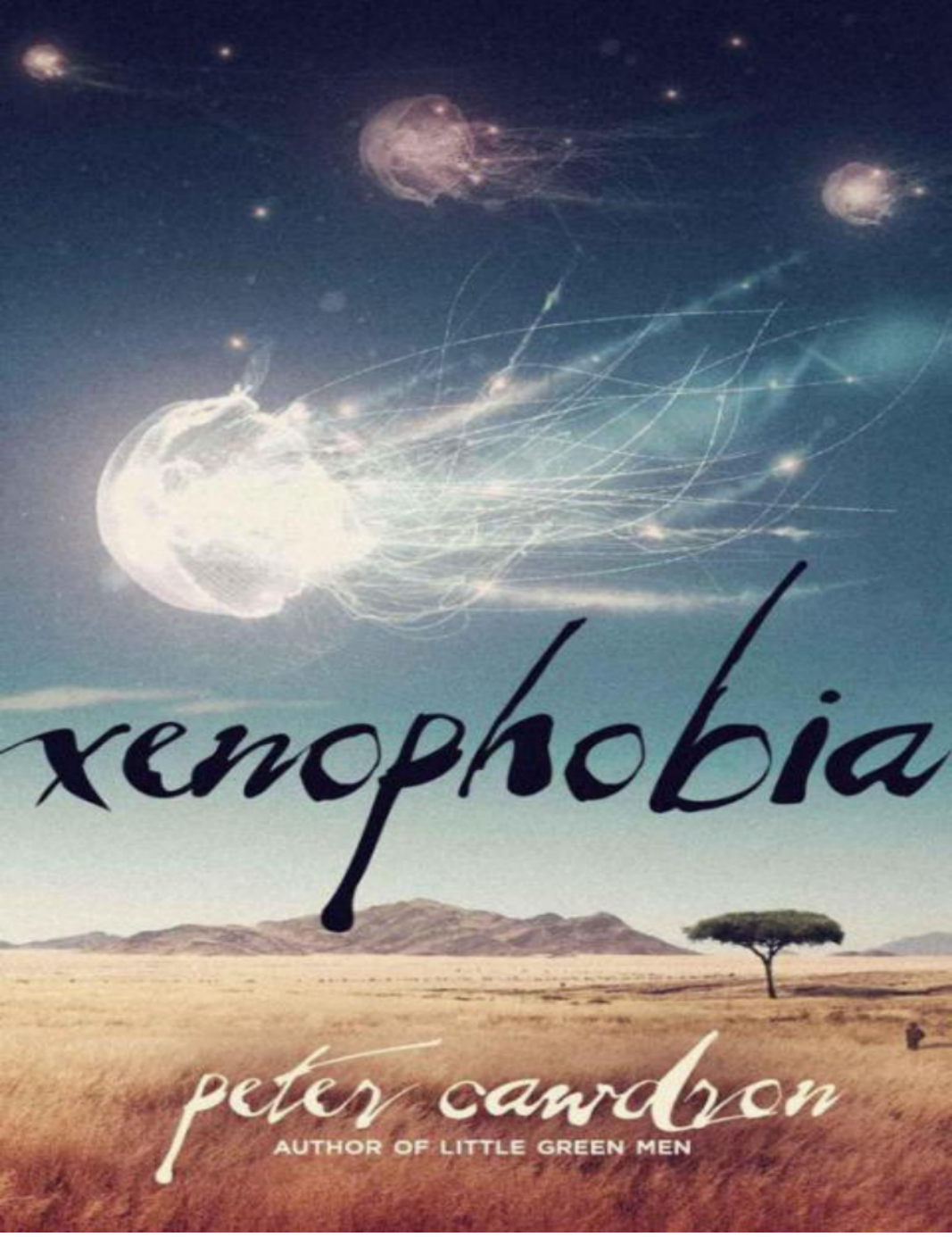
xenophobia
peter cawdron
AUTHOR OF LITTLE GREEN MEN

SHOUT
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IT

# Annotation

*Xenophobia* is set in Malawi, Africa, with US soldiers acting as peacekeepers to stop a civil war erupting. When an alien spacecraft arrives in orbit, America is thrown into turmoil and US troops are withdrawn from hotspots around the globe to provide support at home. Malawi descends into chaos. *Xenophobia* follows a band of US Rangers that stay behind to get doctors and patients from an outlying field hospital to safety. When hundreds of alien spacecraft begin flying overhead, the dynamics of war take on an entirely new dimension.


- Peter Cawdron
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# Peter Cawdron
# XENOPHOBIA

# Chapter 01: Malawi

Dust kicked off the dry grassy field. Fine grains of sand blew outward with the downdraft from the twin rotor blades of the incoming Osprey.

Standing there on the outskirts of a small African village, Elizabeth Bower shielded her face from the sting of thousands of tiny dust particles, loose strips of grass, sand, dirt, and the occasional twig shooting across the ground as the Osprey touched down.

Bower didn't like the Osprey. She loved flying in helicopters and didn't mind airplanes, even uncomfortable military flights, but a craft that was both a helicopter and a plane just didn't sit right with her.

The pilot powered down the engine and the winds dropped from those of a hurricane to a blustery summer storm.

Four soldiers ran in as the tailgate on the Osprey lowered and the whine of the engines fell away. Dr. Bower followed them with one arm wrapped around her waist, holding her white medical coat closed against the wind.

There wasn't much point in wearing the white coat outside the village hospital, particularly out on the rough stretch of ground that had been officially designated as the landing zone, but the military made such a big deal about their dress codes. Whether they were wearing fatigues, combat gear or going for a run in their PT shorts, it seemed uniforms played an important part in their routine, and subconsciously, Bower felt she had to compete. For her, the knee-length jacket was a uniform of sorts, and she'd noticed the soldiers responded to the white jacket, affording her respect on those few occasions when they interacted.

For the most part, the soldiers stayed out on patrol in the jungle, returning only once or twice a month. But when they returned, the choppers would come, bringing much needed supplies. Bower found that if she dressed in civvies, as they called her floral skirts and colorful T-shirts, there was a subtle, but perceptible change in their demeanor, as though they were talking down to her. That some African villager lay on a cot before her with abscessed sores or a broken leg seemed incidental. With their military training, uniforms spoke louder than either her words or actions.

Technically, Médecins Sans Frontières was an NGO, a non-government organization independent of the military or any one particular country, and Bower liked the autonomy that gave her. Her supplies normally came overland, but UN officials turned a blind eye to packing a few crates on the military resupply runs, and that gave her more flexibility.

Médecins Sans Frontières meant Doctors Without Borders, but as Elizabeth Bower understood all too well, it was impossible to be apolitical. Eventually, one way or another, everyone had to side with someone, and the US military, operating under the UN flag, had kept the rebels at bay for over two years. Tensions still simmered in the highlands, and yet the civil war was all but over.

As she ran up to the open cargo hold of the Osprey, Bower expected to see her monthly resupply crate wrapped in the usual absurd amount of transparent plastic, full of boxes with medical markings. She'd ordered more cots, mosquito nets and bandages, along with the standard complement of medicines and vaccines, and birthing packs for the pregnant women in the outlying villages.

The loadmaster was walking down the steel ramp before Bower realized the inside of the Osprey was lined with troops seated facing each other, their backpacks and weapons clogging the walkway. Her heart sank. There was no resupply coming. In that fraction of a second, she'd already begun thinking about how she could stretch her existing supplies, and to whom she could scream at over the radio.

Sergeant Jameson seemed as surprised as she was. He stood there scratching his head. With his short, blonde hair shaved close to the scalp and his skin pink from the African sun, Jameson looked British rather than American.

Being of African descent, Bower's dark skin allowed her to blend in with the villagers. She kept her curly hair shorter than most of the women in the village, giving her an almost boyish look, although the curves of her body dispelled any doubt about her gender. The only thing that distinguished Bower as a foreigner was her British accent and her Western clothing.

"Where's the resupply?" Jameson yelled over the whine of the idling engines, although Bower doubted he was talking about her medicine. Jameson was after more rations and ammunition.

They were a strange lot, the soldiers. Their patches distinguished them as Rangers, but they kept to themselves, even when they were around the village. Bower couldn't figure them out. The Americans were all business. They'd play with the kids in the village from time to time, and talked warmly with the elders, but they seemed aloof, as though they were just passing through. They never really talked to her in anything other than an official capacity, and she wasn't sure if they were embarrassed by Médecins or if they just weren't confident in dealing with an NGO, or perhaps it was her, maybe she was the prickly one. Although she'd have liked to follow that line of reasoning further there was no time to consider that now. Her confusion about the supply situation at the moment consumed her thoughts. One thing she knew, the Americans were good at their jobs. The rebels had stuck

to the tablelands, rarely venturing in force into the valley for fear of the Rangers.

Jameson yelled at the loadmaster. “We were supposed to get parts for the M107.”

“Get your men on board” yelled the loadmaster, ignoring him. “We’ve got orders to pull you and your team out of here. We’re headed to Dar Es Salaam in Tanzania, and from there on to the USS William Lawrence.”

“You were supposed to be dropping off supplies,” cried Jameson over the whine of the engines.

“Change of orders. Get your kit together. You too, Doc.”

“I don’t think you understand,” yelled Bower, struggling to be heard over the turboprops still fanning the air. “I’m with Médecins Sans Frontières, part of the UNIASCO.”

“They’re pulling everyone out,” the loadmaster stated baldly. “UN, US, French, Australians, military and civilian, NGOs, the works. Everyone’s leaving.”

“What?” cried Bower, unable to accept this bombshell. “Do you realize what will happen here if we leave? Do you understand the kind of bloodshed that will be unleashed? Which dick weed, pencil pushing, brain dead bureaucrat dreamed up this stupid idea?”

“The Secretary-General of the United Nations, Ma’am. At the request of the Security Council.”

“And that’s supposed to impress me?” Bower asked, furious at his answer.

The loadmaster ignored her, talking to Jameson, and that pissed her off even more.

“Get your men to square away their kit and get on board.”

Jameson led Bower away from the Osprey. He must have sensed her growing rage as he took her gently by the arm. His men followed close behind. Bower wasn’t at all happy about being patronized, but she could see Jameson was being considerate, and she was pleased to get away from what she thought of as an imposing, flying metal coffin. She didn’t know how anyone could think straight with the high pitched whine of the engines and the wind constantly swirling around them.

The loadmaster followed a few paces behind.

“Get the men to stow their kit and meet back here in five,” Jameson said to Private Bosco.

“You’re going to leave?” Bower asked, her mind reeling at the prospect. “You’re just going to abandon the hospital.”

“You heard the loadmaster. We’ve got orders.”

“Orders?” cried Bower with disbelief. “You and your bloody orders.”

Dr. Kowalski came up beside them, seeing Elizabeth Bower berating the sergeant. He was an older man of European descent, with thick gray hair tossed carelessly to one side. He wore small round glasses, like those immortalized by John Lennon, only they made his face look large by comparison. In any other context he could have been mistaken for a mad scientist, only his demeanor was such that Bower doubted he could ever hurt a fly.

"What's going on?"

"They're pulling us out, Mitch," Bower replied. "Can you believe that? No explanation as to why, just some vague bullshit, orders to evacuate."

"That doesn't make any sense. What about our patients? What about the staff?"

"I've got to call this in to Kasungu," Bower growled, turning back to the loadmaster. "I want to talk to someone in charge."

"There's no one in Kasungu," the loadmaster said. "They pulled them out two days ago."

"Why the hell didn't anyone tell us?" Bower was fuming, her hands defiantly on her hips. Her world was falling apart around her.

"I don't know. They were supposed to."

"Well, I'm not leaving," Bower replied stubbornly.

"You have to," the loadmaster said emphatically.

"I'll have you know, the military has no jurisdiction over an NGO medical mission. You're here for our security, nothing more. We're answerable to the UN high commission in Lilongwe, not some idiot thousands of miles away in New York."

"You don't understand," the loadmaster replied, but Bower cut him off before he could continue.

"I don't understand?" she yelled, her finger just inches from his nose. "Oh, I understand exactly what this is. Some politician's losing votes over body bags and decides another Bosnia or another Rwanda is nothing compared to saving his sorry ass in his next election.

"You can't give me one good reason why you're pulling out other than that you're following orders. I'm sorry, but just that's not good enough. As a doctor, I have a duty of care to my patients and my staff. I will not just up and leave."

Elizabeth Bower was in full voice. She didn't get to be in charge of a field hospital in the middle of a smoldering civil war by being a wallflower. She had no problem raising her voice.

"You and I can run. It's easy for us. We just hop on some bloody flying contraption and disappear into the sunset. But what about them?"

Bower pointed at several of the nurses standing outside the hospital tent, watching the commotion from a distance.

“You and I might be able to wave a passport and hop on a flight to Europe or the US, but they can’t. I have a responsibility to support my African staff. I will not leave them to the rebels.”

“We have an obligation to care for these people,” Dr. Kowalski added, adjusting his glasses as he spoke. His voice was calm. Bower could see he was trying to take the emotion out of the moment. “If we just up and go, the militia will come riding in here and steal our supplies. God knows what they’ll do to the villagers that have collaborated with us. You can’t just pull us out like this. Surely, there’s been a mistake. There must be some other way.”

Jameson was unusually quiet for an energetic American soldier. Bower could see him weighing his options mentally.

“But they’re Africans!” the loadmaster protested, pointing at the nurses and the medical orderly. “They can blend in with the rest of the natives.”

“It’s not that simple,” Dr. Kowalski explained. “If someone stumbles in here with a broken arm or a bullet wound, we’ll treat them regardless of where they’ve come from. The rebels know that. They may not dare attack you openly, but don’t think for a minute that they’re not out there watching and waiting. They know about everything that goes on in this village. They’ll stroll in with a bag of seed or with some other pretense to keep tabs on people. This is exactly what they’ve been holding out for. They haven’t been trying to beat the UN, just to outlast it. You’re playing right into their hands.”

“It’s not my problem,” the loadmaster snapped. “You’ve got five minutes to get on that aircraft or I’m leaving without you.” He looked for support from Jameson, but the sergeant was quiet.

Bower felt like screaming. The loadmaster was being completely unreasonable. Typical bloody authoritarian bureaucracy, she thought, gritting her teeth.

The loadmaster wasn’t going to waste any more time. He turned and jogged back over to the open bay of the Osprey. Soldiers milled around the back of the aircraft, taking the opportunity to stretch their legs or to urinate in the bushes on the edge of the clearing, which infuriated the loadmaster. He started yelling at them, corralling them back into the aircraft.

“Like herding cats,” Kowalski said, laughing as he watched the loadmaster waving his arms and calling for the troops to re-board the Osprey. “So, what do we do, Liz?”

Bower looked at Jameson. His eyes seemed to say something his lips couldn’t.

“We’ll be fine,” she said. Her voice sounded convincing, but she knew her bravado was sorely misplaced.

Jameson was silent, his eyes focused straight ahead, looking into

the middle distance.

"Honestly. You should follow your orders. We'll make do."

Standing there in his camo gear, Jameson flipped his regulation-issue army cap on his head. His eyes focused intently on her as his lips pulled tight. Bower felt a little intimidated by him. She had to say something, to articulate some kind of plan. That's what the military did, wasn't it? They always had a plan, she thought, and Bower was determined to offer something to break the impasse.

"We'll bring in a couple of trucks from Mzimba and drive the staff and patients down to Ksaungu. The rebels will leave the villagers alone, but if they catch anyone that worked in the hospital, they'll kill them for mingling with us foreign devils. We've got to get our staff out of here. We owe them much, at least."

"And from Ksaungu?" asked Jameson.

"From Ksaungu they'll be able to make their way overland to Mozambique. We'll drive on to Lilongwe. There'll be someone there. The UN is not going to abandon the capital. We'll be able to get a flight out to Kenya or South Africa."

Private Bosco came up beside Sergeant Jameson. "We're ready."

"Bring the guys in," Jameson replied. With a wolf whistle, Bosco called the other soldiers over.

The loadmaster was standing by the cockpit of the Osprey, talking with the pilots. Jameson jogged over to him.

Bower couldn't hear what was being said, but the exchange was heated, arms were flying as the two men went toe-to-toe, pointing, waving, yelling. Snippets floated on the breeze, barely audible above the whine of the idling engine.

"She's a goddamn Brit. Let the Brits take care of her… You're disobeying a direct order… We have no idea if there will even be any more evacuation flights."

Alile ran over to talk to Bower and Kowalski.

Alile was the senior nurse within the hospital. She was the only native Malawian Bower knew who had received formal medical training as a registered nurse, although Alile had to go to South Africa to get it. Bower knew Alile was concerned about the young woman with the premature baby.

On her part, Bower's head was spinning. She was trying to gauge her own reaction, trying to detach herself from her emotional outrage and think clearly about the implications of her decision.

"Is everything OK?" Alile asked. Her dark skin glistened in the sunlight. Beads woven through her tightly plaited hair twinkled in the sunlight. Most of the African women kept their hair in plaits, with braids running in tight cornrows woven hard against the skull. Alile's hair looked pretty. Bower never had time for plaits and braids, they

took hours to put in and only lasted a couple of weeks before they had to be painstakingly unpicked and woven in again. She didn't see the point.

Bower couldn't lie to Alile.

"We've been asked to leave, but don't worry, we're not going anywhere."

"Did we at least get the powdered milk?"

Bower gestured to the empty ground around her, saying, "I'm sorry."

They'd ordered milk powder to help the premature baby gain some weight. Caring for a premature baby was no easy task in a Western hospital, let alone in the middle of a scorching, fly-blown African summer. Even with mosquito nets and fans, insects were a real problem and could cause complications for newborns.

Jameson jogged back over to his waiting troops.

Alile left them, walking back to join the other nurses. Bower wanted to tell her she didn't have to go, that this wasn't some exclusive foreigners-only club, but Bower understood her mindset. For Alile, there was always a sense of us and them, and having US soldiers around only accentuated that perception. Bower tried to treat Alile as an equal, but the very act of making that effort reinforced the inequality between them.

Sixteen soldiers crouched down on the edge of the landing zone, half sitting on their heels, their elbows resting on their knees as they squatted in front of Jameson. The sergeant explained what little he knew as the two civilian doctors stood to one side.

"So I'm asking for volunteers," Jameson added after walking the troops through the plan to evacuate by land to Ksaungu and then move on to the capital, Lilongwe. "You should know, the crew of the Osprey have radioed our intentions through to theater command. They're not happy about the decision, but they're deferring to our judgment on the ground. Command said the last flight out of Lilongwe is scheduled in two days. If we make that, we get a free ride. If we don't, we're on a forced march across the mountains."

"I like it," said Private Mathers.

One of the other soldiers joked with him, saying, "You would, you sadistic bastard."

"Finally, a chance for a little action. I'm in," Bosco announced.

"Humping through two hundred miles of jungle. Sounds idyllic," Smithy added.

It was only at hearing Smithy's voice that Bower realized Smithy was a woman. At first glance, Bower had assumed Smithy was simply a shorter, less muscular male soldier, but now that she looked closer there was no doubt about Smithy's gender. Strands of blonde hair

protruded from beneath her helmet, while her baggy camouflage shirt barely obscured her breasts. Her hands were petite. Bower could not imagine violence being unleashed by such slender hands. Without make up, Smithy's face looked like that of a clean-shaven teen, but her thin lips spoke with a distinctly feminine pitch.

"It's a walk in the park," Smithy continued. "An overgrown, bug infested, leech filled park. I love it."

"Hell, yes," said Elvis, giving Smithy a high five.

With his sideburns and diamond-rimmed sunglasses, Elvis looked out of place in army fatigues, and that was clearly the image he wanted to portray. Bower had no idea whether his southern accent was genuine or put on for show, but he sounded like The King. The Rangers all sported buzz-cuts, all except Elvis who had a mop of hair growing over his short back and sides. How he got away with that must have been quite a story, thought Bower, but he looked and sounded like his namesake, Elvis Presley, right down to his cheesy grin and his beautiful white teeth. Elvis looked completely out of place in Africa. He should have been on a movie set.

"I'm asking for two fire teams, eight men," Jameson said.

Although all the hands went up, there were some that shot up like a pheasant being flushed by a golden retriever. Jameson called out those soldiers by name. Bower realized precisely why Jameson wanted these particular men with him, but why Smithy? Jameson had selected her among others, like Elvis and Bosco. Something within Bower objected to putting a woman in harm's way. It was irrational, of course, and deep down Bower understood that. Putting anyone in danger of losing their life was morally dubious at best, but Elvis and Bosco seemed more robust, better suited to the risks. Smithy, though, grinned, and Bower could see she relished the opportunity.

Smithy slapped Elvis on the arm, saying, "Looks like you're stuck with me, Big Guy."

"Absolutely."

The rest of the team was dismissed and grudgingly piled into the Osprey.

Jameson explained his decision to the loadmaster as Bosco scavenged a radio and extra munitions from the soldiers on the Osprey. Elvis and Smithy joked around with the other troops loading into the helicopter.

"It's your funeral, buddy," the loadmaster said to Jameson. He walked off and raised the tailgate.

Smithy jogged away from the Osprey, grinning like a little girl on Christmas Day as she rested a machine gun over her shoulder, the proud spoils of banter with several of the soldiers on board the aircraft. Elvis joked around with her, carrying two ammunition cans

for the gun.

"Goddamn," he cried. "It's Combat Barbie, complete with a lightweight plastic SAW."

Smithy cocked her head to one side, exaggerating her movements as she twisted from her hips, looking very much like a living, plastic doll. She posed for the remaining soldiers and waved with her hand, saying, "Look what's new from MATTEL."

The remaining soldiers laughed and whistled. Smithy hammed up her act with a fake smile as she said, "Ken. I want a divorce. Now, where did I leave my handbag?"

Bosco was grinning too. He had conned someone out of a civilian band radio. He held it up as though it were a trophy and the soldiers cheered.

As the turboprops on the Osprey wound up to speed, a hail of fine stones and grit again sprayed out across the grassy plain. The remaining soldiers along with the two doctors moved back, catching the death defying sight of the clumsy Osprey banking above the trees before the craft turned and flew over the village and out across the lake toward Tanzania.

As silence fell, Bower felt a twinge of regret. Even with Jameson standing beside her in his seemingly invincible US Army uniform, Bower felt abandoned. And yet she knew she'd have felt unbearable guilt if she'd boarded that flight. Watching the Osprey disappear into the distance, she couldn't help but wonder if she'd made a mistake, one she wouldn't be able to take back, one that could cost them all their lives.

Elvis put on his finest Mississippi accent, waving at the troop carrier as he called out, "Y'all come back now, ya hear?"

That brought a smile to her face.

Jameson, though, wasted no time.

"Bosco, get on the net and see if you can figure out what the hell's got everyone so spooked.

"Elvis, take Mathers, Jones and Smithy and go get those trucks from Mzimba. Borrow, beg, steal. Do whatever it takes, but make sure there's plenty of diesel.

"Chalmers, Davidson and Phelps, recon the area and start thinking about approaches, defensive positions, and fields of fire."

The soldiers dispersed as Jameson escorted Bower and Kowalski to the makeshift hospital, a series of three tents on the edge of the village with its grass topped mud huts and low stone walls. He spoke as they walked, briefing the doctors in a formal tone.

"The rebels on the tableland are going to see our troops pulling out. The fox is going to assume the hen house is open. I doubt they'll waste any time. If we can, I'd like to move out before nightfall."

“We’ll get everyone ready,” Bower replied, brushing the dust out of her hair. “Mitch, if you work with the nurses, I’ll pack up the medicine and burn our records.”

Less than an hour later, while Jameson was helping to fold up cots and Bower was packing vials of malaria vaccine, Bosco came running in with the civilian radio. “You’ve got to hear this. There’s some serious shit going down.”

Bower stared at him, surprised at his profanity. Not that she was a prude, but that he’d so quickly normalized her as being one of the group.

The radio signal was weak, with static breaking up the words. Bosco turned up the volume as Jameson leaned on a box and Bower sat on the edge of a rickety desk.

*“…impeachment proceedings have begun in earnest within the House of Representatives.”*

A British reporter with a feminine voice spoke over the top of a heated exchange between several distinctly American voices. Bower recognized the southern accent of the US President.

*“You have no right to sit here in judgment of my decisions. I do not recognize the legitimacy of these proceedings and will continue to press both the Senate and the Supreme Court to reinstate me as Commander-in-Chief of the United States of America.”*

*“Response from Senator Johansen,” the reporter said rapidly, trying to interject identity for the listeners while trying not to talk over the swell of anger and emotion growing within the argument.*

*“Article Four of the Outer Space Treaty, a binding international agreement that has been in effect for over fifty years, outlaws the militarization of space and the deployment of nuclear weapons beyond Earth.”*

The senator slowed down his speech, deliberately emphasizing his point as he spoke.

*“Mr President, your lawless, reckless arrogance has plunged the United States into the abyss… never before… condemnation… Russia, China and…”*

The signal was breaking up, cutting into static as Bower strained to pick out fragments of each sentence. The President replied.

*“…will not be lectured… Easy to sit there and criticize me without the weight of responsibility on your shoulders… we have squandered our only opportunity to gain a strategic advantage in the event of hostilities… there will be war, mark my words. History has shown time and again that war is the inevitable consequence of a clash of cultures…”*

Reception on the radio continued to fade.

“What the fuck?” Jameson cried as it became clear they’d lost the signal.

"Oh, it gets better," Bosco added. "You think that's fucked up, wait until you hear the rest of the story."

He was fiddling with the radio, changing the station.

Another British voice broke through the static, which surprised Bower, as she assumed Bosco would have been hunting for local radio stations, or for something out of South Africa. She wasn't sure, but both channels seemed to be BBC World Service broadcasts. Again, the reporter's accent lent an air of authenticity to the commentary, one Bower found convincing.

*"The revelation of a secret government project concealing the existence…"*

Static tore the sentence in two. Bower strained to hear what was being said.

*"…has shaken not only the US but the world. For seven months, the President and his cabinet presided over what can only be described as a conspiracy of silence.*

*"Rumors of intimidation, career assassination, physical assault, incarceration on false charges and even murder threaten to topple this administration.*

*"The evidence is damning, with new video footage of President Addison and his security detail in a midnight meeting with David Alexander Wilson, ex-CIA chief of station for the United Kingdom and alleged ringmaster of the project."*

"I don't get it," Jameson said. "What the hell is all this about?"

"Wait for it," Bosco replied, his words terse and abrupt. He clearly didn't want to talk over the broadcast.

*"NASA officials vetoed the launch of the Orion spacecraft two weeks ago, with NASA administrative director Philip Monroe citing technical concerns over the rocket booster, but an inside source has leaked telemetry readouts from the rocket, revealing no faults in the system and raising questions as to why the launch was actually delayed..*

*"With the arrest of Wilson in Texas two days ago for the murder of NASA director Philip Monroe, the house of cards surrounding the President finally came tumbling down. FBI surveillance has linked Wilson with the President, as well as with Monroe, exposing the conspiracy.*

*"Yesterday, the veil of secrecy was lifted when Congress formally impeached the President as an accessory to murder, with a secondary charge for the unlawful deployment of nuclear weapons in space. Further charges are expected as the investigation continues.*

*"Ostensibly, the Orion was scheduled to explore Cruithne, an asteroid that's erroneously referred to as Earth's second moon. In reality, the Orion was tasked to intercept the alien spacecraft before it reached Earth's orbit.*

*"NASA director Monroe had objected to the inclusion of a 15 megaton Plutonium warhead onboard the Orion and had threatened to go public*

*with the revelation when he was murdered by Wilson."*

Under his breath, Jameson uttered one word. "Fuck."

"You're not wrong," Bower added.

*"Details are still emerging, but it seems the crew of the Orion were not aware of their deadly payload. President Addison has admitted to his involvement in authorizing the placement of the nuclear device on the Orion as a contingency in the event of hostilities, saying it was not an overtly hostile act in itself, but Congress disagrees.*

*"Given the severity of the accusations and the weight of evidence against the President, Congress has issued a Memorandum of Understanding to the White House, informing the President that both Congress and the Senate will honor the impeachment process and conduct proceedings in an orderly and timely manner, but neither will tolerate any abuse of executive power during this time. The language is verbose, but the meaning is clear: The Office of the President still stands, but the President himself is powerless. Essentially, Congress is outwardly offering the President the courtesy of due process, but in practice the White House has been shutdown. Congress may have exceeded its mandate, but that will be for the Supreme Court to decide once the Senate trial is complete.*

*"With the President effectively under house arrest, the executive branch of government has been paralyzed, awaiting the outcome of impeachment proceedings. Congress contends the President exceeded his executive authority by placing a nuclear weapon on a civilian spacecraft. The Special Legal Council, established by the Senate, further contends that such an act is tantamount to a declaration of war against an unknown alien race.*

*"Condemnation from around the world has been swift, with the British government saying such an act threatens the very existence of life on Earth. While French ambassador…"*

Static broke the broadcast. Words faded in and out, fragments of sentences came through, barely enough to grasp their fleeting meaning.

*"Beijing has lodged a formal complaint… following UN Security Council resolution 2992 intended to limit interaction with the alien spacecraft until such… President is defiant, insisting his actions were in the national… unilateral action vetoed by Congress… ultimate decision may rest with the nine members of the Supreme Court, five of whom are Republican appointments…"*

Bosco slapped the side of the radio, shaking it in an irrational effort to improve the reception.

*"As protests within the US mount, Congress has authorized the withdrawal of American forces from hotspots around the globe, bolstering its forces in country… National Guard… mobilized in support of police… Russia has withdrawn… Pakistan…"*

The sound was fading.

Bosco turned up the radio volume but that made the static worse. Slowly, the broadcast signal faded to a hiss.

# Chapter 02: Nightfall

Elizabeth Bower was doing all she could to maintain the stoic, stiff upper-lip for which the British were renowned, but the radio broadcast had shaken her. It wasn't so much what was said as what wasn't. There were so many questions, so few answers. The frustration of being isolated from the civilized world weighed on her mind. She wondered about her parents and her sister, wondering how much more they knew. Somehow, there was solace in knowing. It was irrational, really, she thought, and yet confidence had always come from knowledge. Even a condemned man could be at peace if he knew the schedule by which he'd be executed. Not knowing was torture.

Bower had thought she was ready for anything. Ever since she was a child she brimmed with confidence, but now uncertainty clouded her thinking. Having spent a couple of years in Malawi, she thought she'd seen the worst the civil war could produce. She'd never been on the front line, but she'd treated those who had been. She liked to think nothing could shake her, and yet now her world seemed to tilt sideways, like the deck of the Titanic slowly slipping beneath the waves.

Bower busied herself by organizing patients, assessing who could flee with the villagers and those that needed specialized care. She moved between them, talking with the remaining few patients as they lay on mats stretched out on the grass, waiting for the evacuation to begin. Most of those that were able had hobbled off with the rest of the tribe along with several she'd expected to stay. One man with tuberculosis shouldn't have been going anywhere, but he felt he was better off with his family.

The village chief said he expected the rebels to torch the huts and was going to take his people into the bush.

Physically, nothing had changed since this morning, and yet nothing seemed the same. Bower's hopes of packing up the hospital and relocating seemed futile. The UN would not be back, not any time soon. Jameson said they should leave the hospital tents standing and give the rebels something to burn, something to focus their frustrations on. Ultimately, he expected the rebels to be lazy. If they had easy targets they'd attack, but if they had to work for their prey they'd soon tire. With the villagers going bush for up to a week, he figured the tribe could avoid hostilities and then get on with rebuilding their homes.

The village was almost empty.

Outside the hospital there were three nurses, an orderly and a dozen patients waiting for the trucks. One of the patients had a broken

leg, several were recovering from malaria, while another was recovering from a severe bout of dysentery and had lost a lot of strength. She was improving though, and once she regained her muscle-mass she'd be fine.

Bower's eleven AIDS cases, all with advanced symptoms, had left with their families. They said, if they were to die, they wanted to die where they were born, not hundreds of miles away. One of her patients was a sixteen year old girl with a premature baby born at roughly thirty weeks.

The baby was doing well but should have been in an intensive care unit. His breathing was shallow. His tiny hands moved in spasms rather than in a coordinated motion, and Bower feared there had been some brain damage from oxygen starvation during the protracted delivery, but such an accurate diagnosis was beyond the reach of her equipment. Quietly, she hoped he'd show signs of normalizing as he grew in size. For now, it was a case of waiting, keeping him on a drip feed and keeping his environment sterile. His young mother, still very much a child herself, rarely left his side.

Bower buried herself in the concerns of her patients and not in her own worries, even though her nurses were quite capable of caring for the handful of patients by themselves. She didn't want to admit it, but she was trying to distract herself from the implications of being abandoned as the world turned its focus out into space.

Bower sat down with Alile, watching as Kowalski finished packing medical supplies.

"The nurses are talking," Alile said. "They say there's a spaceship from another world."

"Apparently there is," Bower replied with a smile. "It's hard to imagine, isn't it?"

Alile nodded, asking, "Do you think they'll be friendly?"

"I hope so, but I really don't know. We're in uncharted territory."

"In Africa, we have a saying," Alile said. "To get lost is to learn the way."

"Well," Bower replied. "I like that. When it comes to dealing with creatures from another planet, we are most certainly lost, so I guess you're right: we'll learn along the way."

Bower turned to Alile. As they were so physically similar she saw a lot of herself in the young lady, a desire for knowledge, a desire to help others, a desire to change the world, even if it was only one person at a time.

"The funny thing is," Bower continued. "I've been in Africa for five years, mostly in Kenya, but in the almost two years I've been in Malawi I've barely thought about home. Not the place, not the people, not even my family. Oh, sure, I get letters from them and the odd

present comes through the mail, but all of a sudden some spaceship arrives from another planet and I can't stop thinking about home. How strange is that?"

"It is not strange," Alile replied. "Water that runs slow runs deep."

Bower wasn't sure what Alile meant by that, and was going to ask her to elaborate when Elvis pulled up in the squad Hummer, pulling a truck with a tow rope.

"We've got problems," was all Bower overheard as the private spoke with Jameson.

Bower felt she needed to be involved, even though there was nothing she could do and she'd probably only get in the way. All this was her fault, or so it seemed in her mind, and she wanted to fix things, only this was no broken leg she could set.

"There were three trucks, none of them in working order. We salvaged what we could and dragged the best of them here, an old Deuce. Smithy reckons the transmission is gone, and there's a crack in the engine block, but she says she can get her working again."

"How long?" Jameson asked.

Elvis turned to Smithy as the young female private walked up beside them. "Three, four hours, if everything goes well."

"OK, so worst case, eight to ten hours. Looks like we're going to be here for the night. We're going to need to set up some defensive positions. Doc, you're going to want to get your people into the village, behind the low stone walls. If we get into a firefight, keep your head down."

"Understood."

Bower felt an immense sense of gratitude for the soldiers. It was reassuring to see how calmly they dealt with the possibility of violence. Their confidence gave her comfort, and her mind boggled with the realization that her headstrong thoughtlessness could have seen her and Kowalski stranded.

Several hours passed idly by.

The odd villager moved between the huts, either hiding possessions or packing up cooking equipment. In the distance, most of the villagers were walking down a grassy slope with their meager possessions wrapped in bundles on their shoulders or balanced on their heads. The men herded cattle before them, kicking up the dry dust as they slapped the ground with sticks, the sound driving the cattle on.

Elvis used the Hummer to pull the truck onto a dusty patch of ground normally covered in market stalls. He and Smithy worked on the engine, lifting the hood and crawling underneath the old truck as they sought to fix what looked like a classic American army truck

from World War II. It couldn't have been that old, Bower thought, although in Africa anything was possible. Certainly, Elvis didn't look out of place standing next to the drab olive truck with its knobby tires and high wheel arches.

Bower could hear Smithy and Elvis joking with each other as they worked on the truck.

"Pass me a wrench," said Smithy, her feet sticking out from beneath the vehicle.

Elvis was too busy looking at himself in a cracked wing-mirror on the side of the truck. He was running his hands through his hair, slicking back his dark locks.

"What the hell are you putting in your hair?" asked Smithy, her dusty face appearing from beneath the truck.

"Brake oil."

"You fucking idiot," Smithy laughed. Such strong language sounded strange coming from her baby face. "We need brakes. Don't go bleeding them dry for your damn hair!"

Elvis laughed. "I can't help it if I'm sexy and you're hot."

"Dream on, loser," Smithy replied as Elvis handed her the wrench. They both laughed.

Elvis was humming a tune. Bower couldn't quite make out the song as she walked past, but she was sure she knew the artist, and he hadn't been alive for decades.

"Hey, baby."

Bower knew exactly what was going on. Elvis was fishing for a response, trying to bait her. He must have known she was not one to condone sexism, and ordinarily she would have jumped down his throat. On this day, however, the pressure of the moment elicited a different response, one tempered by her appreciation for how the soldiers were sticking their necks out for her and her team.

"I am not," she said with a deliberate, polite smile, "your baby."

The very word resonated only as a reference to newborns in her thinking.

"Sure thing," Elvis replied, a swagger in his motion. "Whatever you say, sweet lips."

Bower paused for a moment, looking down at her feet, trying to compose herself. She wasn't sure whether to be angry or to laugh. She pointed her finger at him, shaking it softly and smiling as she turned and walked on, saying, "You're outrageous."

It was the accent, his southern drawl. Bower just couldn't take Elvis seriously.

"She's got your measure," Smithy added, laughing.

Elvis grinned.

Jameson was sitting on a stone wall, his M4 rifle leaning beside

him. With the sun sitting low on the horizon, his face was lit up in the soft warm hues of the coming sunset. Bower wandered over.

"Mind if I join you?"

"Nope."

She sat down beside him, looking out across the valley toward the tableland. Dry grasslands gave way to dense jungle leading up to the mountain plateau.

"This wasn't a good idea, was it?"

"Nope."

Well, he was honest, she figured. What had she expected him to say? It was only after she'd asked that she realized how silly it must have sounded. Jameson was chewing on the end of a long blade of grass and seemed lost in thought.

"Is that all you're going to say?"

"Nope," Jameson replied, grinning.

"Very funny."

He smiled. "You see the dirt track leading down through the jungle?"

"Yeah," Bower replied, struggling to make out sections of the road as it wound its way down from the highlands.

"At least a dozen trucks have driven down there in the last couple of hours. Our friends are on the move, spreading out in force."

"That's not good, is it?" As the words left her lips, she knew what was coming.

"Nope."

"So what do you think will happen?"

"Oh," Jameson replied. "I think all hell is about to break loose. I'm just hoping we're far enough away that we don't get too much attention too soon."

Bower was silent. Jameson must have picked up on her concern.

"Bosco got through to Af-Com. The task force is already steaming north, but there's a destroyer bring up the rear, just off the coast of Madagascar. If we miss the flight from Lilongwe, they'll dispatch a helo once they're in range. We'll get your people down to Kasungu and assess the situation from there."

"What about all this other stuff?"

"What? The aliens?"

"Yeah," Bower replied, leaning back on her arms, enjoying the cool, evening wind that was beginning to cut through the stifling heat of the day.

"I hardly believe it myself. Seems surreal. I try not to think about it too much. I need to focus on here and now. Once we get out of here, I guess there will be more time to think about that."

Bower nodded her head in silent agreement.

“And you? What do you think?” Jameson asked. “Do you think they’re anything like the movies?”

Bower laughed. “Oh, no. I’m not too sure what to think, but I doubt they’re anything like what we see in Hollywood. I just can’t imagine an intelligent alien species tracking a bazillion miles through space to blow up the White House, draw crop circles, and conduct anal probes on rednecks.”

Jameson laughed. “Yeah, seems pretty silly doesn’t it? I wonder what they’ll make of our movies.”

“They’ll think we have an overactive imagination.”

“And we do,” Jameson replied.

They sat there in silence for a few seconds before Bower said, “You and your men are surprisingly calm given the circumstances.”

“You learn not to stew in the Rangers. Most people think the army is about combat, but the reality is, firefights last five to ten minutes, maybe half an hour but rarely any longer than that. Firefights are few and far between. More often than not, we’re marching or hiking, scouting or tracking. The glamour is pretty quickly replaced with boredom, excitement is the rare exception to mundane routines, so we learn to take it all in our stride.”

Smithy climbed over the front of the radiator on the old truck. She had her baggy shirt off. Her breasts were prominent beneath her tank-top, but Elvis wasn’t distracted by the view. He shimmied underneath the truck, following her directions. The odd swear word drifted by. As the wind changed direction, Bower overheard Elvis saying, “A-huh, a-huh. I’ve got that bad boy. Y’all just leave this to The King.”

Smithy said something in reply, but Bower didn’t catch it, something about king-dinga-ling. They were an unusual couple, thought Bower. Elvis was so muscular and imposing, while Smithy seemed fragile by comparison, but you’d never know that listening to their banter. They were clearly the best of friends.

“Don’t you think he’s a little strange?” Bower asked.

“What? Elvis?” Jameson replied, turning his head slightly to one side as he looked curiously at her.

“Yeah.”

“Oh, he’s got his quirks, but he’s a great soldier.”

“But don’t you think the whole Elvis routine is a bit… immature.”

Jameson laughed. “A bit, I guess. We’re all children at heart, Doc.”

Bower didn’t have an answer for that. She didn’t agree, but she didn’t want to say something that might offend Jameson.

“When did you grow up, Doc?”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, there’s no line of demarcation. There’s no border to cross, and yet, here we are, all grown up, or at least we like to think we are.

“These guys are kids. Look at them. Most of them can’t even go into a bar, and yet they’re old enough to die for their country. Take Smithy. She’s barely nineteen and looks like she’d get blown over in a storm, but she’s as tough as nails. She’d never been outside of Iowa before, let alone seen the waves of the ocean. And here she is, on the other side of the world, surrounded by global political forces and tribal tensions that make no sense to the daughter of a garage mechanic, but she’s got a job to do and so she gets on with it.

“And as for Elvis. Sure, he’s a little silly at times and plays the whole rock star thing a bit too much, but in battle, there’s no one else I’d rather have by my side. He’s one cool cat under fire.”

Jameson paused, pulling the chewed blade of grass from his mouth and tossing it away.

Bower figured he’d asked a good question and it was only polite to provide an answer so she said, “For me, my childhood ended on my eighth Christmas. Girls are normally quite quiet and subdued, but not me. I was a terror.”

“I find that hard to believe, Doc.”

“Why? Because I’m a woman?”

“Because you seem quite sweet.”

Bower laughed.

“Oh, appearances are deceiving. I didn’t end up in central Africa by collecting Girl Guide patches.”

“You’ve got me there,” Jameson replied.

“Honestly, I don’t know how my parents put up with me. They should have had me on Ritalin or something.

“I was a klutz, always breaking things. Never on purpose, of course, but I’d walk into a store with my school bag on my back and my mother would cry, ‘Watch out.’ I’d turn, trying to avoid god-knows-what, and I’d miss whatever it was my mother feared I was about to destroy only to have my backpack collect a shelf on the other side of the isle, one lined with ornaments. Mom would yell at me, and I’d turn again, trying to see what had happened, only to take out the shelf I’d missed at first.”

Jameson was laughing as she spoke.

“I just had no idea what was going on around me.”

Jameson added, “The phrase, bull in a china shop, springs to mind.”

“Yep. That was me. But I remember that eighth Christmas like it was yesterday. I was so excited about Santa Claus coming and dropping off presents, my presents. I’d sat on his knee at the mall. I’d

told him everything I wanted. And when Christmas Eve came around, I was manic, in a good kinda way. I set out a glass of milk and a couple of cookies for Santa, just in case he got peckish on his rounds. My Mom sent me to bed quite late. I should have gone out like a light, but there I was, lying in bed, staring wide-eyed at the ceiling. I don't know how long I lay there, but it felt like an eternity in the darkness, waiting for the sound of reindeer on the roof.

"I saw some movement in the hall outside my room, just the fleeting shadow of feet shuffling past in the soft light. Everyone was in bed, or at least I thought they were all in bed, so this had to be him, this had to be Santa sneaking into my house. And I was going to meet him. I was going to go out and say hello, and then tell all my friends about it the next day.

"Well, it's no surprise of course, but when I crept out into the hallway I saw my Mom and Dad quietly stacking presents under the Christmas tree in the living room. The glass of milk was half empty, and one of the cookies had a bite out of it. I walked forward in a daze. Mom must have seen me out of the corner of her eye. She turned. My Dad turned. They didn't have to say anything. I knew. I ran back to my room sobbing, crying.

"My Mom tried to explain to me that Santa was just a story parents told their kids to make them feel happy. I asked her why she would lie to me like that. It was cruel. I felt terrible, not happy. She never really answered my question, not to my satisfaction. I cried myself to sleep that night. And that was it, my childhood was over. Oh, I still played with other kids, but the dream had been shattered."

"And," Jameson asked, "You think Elvis is still living in a childhood dream?"

"Something like that."

"Don't lose your childlike innocence, Doc. Even us grown-ups should have something to hold on to."

Bower smiled at the irony of hearing this from an army Ranger. She went to say something, but Bosco had walked over.

"Reception here is lousy," he said. "But there are patches where the signal leaks through. You wanna hear what they're talking about now?"

Bower would have preferred to continue talking with Jameson, but curiosity swamped her like a wave at the beach.

A hiss and crackle broke from the radio as Bosco sat next to Jameson. On the radio, a man was talking, but his words sounded hollow, as though he were speaking from inside a cave.

*"Home Secretary Morris Miles has reassured the British public that there will be transparency into interactions with the alien spacecraft.*

*"We are crossing live to the United Nations where NASA scientists will*

*address the UN General Assembly, explaining the events of the past few months as the craft approached Earth before settling in its current position beyond the moon… Dr. Stephen Dupree, Director of Advanced Research with NASA's Ames Research Center."*

*"…you, please be seated."*

Bower wanted to ask if the radio could be turned up louder, but the prospect of interrupting the signal kept her quiet. Bosco fiddled with the aerial, twisting it slightly trying to pick up the channel with more clarity.

*"…will try to avoid too much technical detail, but there is a need for…"*

The static got worse, and Jameson batted at the air in front of Bosco, signaling for him to stop playing with the radio. Bosco returned the aerial to its original position and the three of them leaned forward, straining to catch each word.

*"…official designation was originally the Morrison comet, after the amateur astronomer, Bruce Morrison from Darwin, Australia, who first detected what we now believe is a vessel of interstellar origin. Morrison located what he thought was a comet beyond the orbit of Sedna almost nine months ago, at a distance of three light days from Earth.*

*"The comet's motion was slightly off the ecliptic, the plane on which the majority of the planets orbit the sun, but that is not unusual for an object originating in the Oort cloud. Morrison was on the opposite side of our solar system, on the far side of the sun. The comet was moving considerably faster than Sedna, but at that distance it was impossible to tell the angle on which it was moving, making it impossible to determine anything other than its relative speed.*

*"Roughly seven months ago, the object changed course, aligning with the ecliptic, and it became clear Morrison was not a naturally-occurring object like a comet or an asteroid. There was some speculation that the comet may have collided with another celestial object, but as Morrison appeared to remain intact this possibility was quickly discounted. Because the object's position lay within 10 degrees of the sun, as viewed from Earth, ground-based observations were largely obscured by the glare of the sun."*

A disembodied voice requested clarification.

*"Please explain further."*

*"Morrison approached the sun from outside our solar system, moving against the sun's direction of travel around the Milky Way. Morrison was observed traveling in a parabolic arc toward the sun. Its motion was obscured by the sun for most of its approach, with its relative motion against the backdrop of the stars opposing that of Earth's orbit. Observations by the Keck Observatory in Hawaii revealed the object was emitting gamma radiation, something that further aroused NASA's attention, initiating the blackout."*

The formal voice requested more clarification.

*"Please explain the term, blackout."*

Dupree continued.

*"Blackout is a NASA protocol for containing speculation in the event of close contact with an extra-terrestrial intelligence. The intent is to avoid panic and confusion. By limiting the dissemination of information, a blackout is designed to ensure a coordinated, measured response rather than a half-cocked reaction. A blackout is intended to avoid unwarranted speculation."*

*"In hindsight, was a blackout appropriate?"* the deeply resonant voice asked.

*"No, sir,"* Dupree replied, his voice barely audible in the static. There was a pause for a second, and Bower wondered what was running through the mind of the man thousands of miles away in what seemed like another world. *"The intention was to provide us with some breathing space so as to formulate an appropriate response, but too many people got burned."*

*"Continue,"* the voice commanded.

*"Notification of the blackout was provided to the National Security Council and the President, who initiated a lockdown of the physical facility at AMES and the transfer of key personnel from Keck."*

*"What made you so sure?"* asked the undisclosed interrogator. *"What made you think this was indeed an alien spacecraft?"*

*"At the initial distance, there was no way of making out any detail on the craft directly. The craft appeared as little more than a blur in a telescope, but the gamma rays told us all we needed to know. Gamma rays are highly energetic particles not associated with comets as they are indicative of subatomic collisions under immense pressure. Gamma rays are normally associated with catastrophic celestial events, like a supernova, an exploding star. To see gamma rays being emitted by something within our solar system was alarming. Spectrometer analysis revealed the presence of hydrogen and helium in the coma, or the head of this supposed comet, while the doppler shift of this light indicated the comet was approaching the solar system at significant speeds."*

*"What do you define as a significant speed?"*

*"Based on our observations,"* the Dupree continued, *"we estimated the craft's speed when first detected at 11% of the speed of light.*

*"This is what confirmed the alien hypothesis for us. The craft's motion relative to Earth seemed much slower than the doppler effect suggested. What we were seeing was a craft rapidly approaching us, while only drifting slightly to one side as it approached. At first, we'd mistaken that sideways motion as its actual motion, but that was an illusion.*

*"You must remember, all speed is relative to your vantage-point. If you're driving down the freeway at 55 miles per hour and another car*

*overtakes you, it may only overtake you at a leisurely pace, perhaps even a walking pace, and yet that car is traveling at 57 miles per hour or 60 miles per hour relative to Earth. In this case, the alien vessel was entering our solar system at a blistering pace, but changes in the doppler shift indicated the craft was slowing, that it was braking.*

*"By the time the craft reached the orbit of Sedna it was traveling at 5% of the speed of light. Two and a half months later, when it passed Pluto, the craft had slowed to less than 2% of the speed of light, and yet at that speed it would still cover the length of the United States in less than a second."*

The interrogator spoke again, a hint of condescension in his voice. It seemed he already knew the answer to the question he was asking.

*"And what caused this gamma radiation? In your opinion, why was this craft giving off this spectacular radiation? Was this display in any way threatening or hostile?"*

*"Oh, no"* Dupree said. *"This wasn't an aggressive act on their part. Space is not empty. Even a seemingly complete vacuum contains a few atoms every cubic meter as well as waves of electromagnetic energy streaming out from the sun. The craft was moving so fast it was colliding with these particles, causing them to fuse. The effect was we saw tremendous amounts of energy being radiated by the vessel as it fired its engines to brake on entering our system. Only the craft was moving so fast it took considerable time to shed that speed. In effect, we saw the tires smoking as it skidded to a stop."*

*"And what did NASA make of this?"*

*"The alien spacecraft was, in effect, using collisions with dust particles, solar winds and wisps of hydrogen to assist in slowing itself, fusing hydrogen into helium in a super-heated plasma out in front of its shield. Think of it like a space capsule returning to Earth with its heat shield glowing white hot from friction with the atmosphere. Essentially, that's what we were seeing, only at higher speeds than we've ever imagined."*

Another voice spoke with almost electronic monotony.

*"Question from the floor: Ambassador Hans Jugen, Germany."*

*"You described a leading shield on the alien vessel, but the images we now see show no sign of any such shielding. How do you explain that?"*

*"Good question,"* Dr. Dupree replied. *"Initially, our view of the object was obscured by the sun, but orbiting telescopes could resolve the basic outline of the craft. The SOHO satellite observing the sun was able to resolve the shield, which appeared broad but thin. As best we understand the physics, it seems the shield was more of a buffer, a temporary sail. We were able to observe the sail unfolding out to a distance of five thousand miles."*

*"Five thousand miles,"* the ambassador cried. *"That's the distance*

*from Germany to China."*

*"Yes,"* Dupree said. *"As a point of comparison, the sail was roughly the size of the Continental US."*

*"But that's huge. And yet, now, there is no such shield."*

*"That's correct. We theorized that this was an ablative shield, slowing the craft as it approached our sun. Once the craft passed the orbit of Mars, the sail appeared to retract."*

*"And that didn't bother you?"*

*"No, we saw no cause for panic."*

*"You saw no cause for panic,"* the ambassador replied, a sense of indignity carrying in his voice. *"We've seen rioting in Munich, Stuttgart and Bonn. The US embassy in London has been torched. In your homeland, protests have erupted in Los Angeles, San Francisco, Salt Lake City, Chicago, New York and Washington DC, and you say there's no cause for panic? Can you understand that for the majority of mankind, whether this thing fuses hydrogen or looks pretty against the backdrop of the stars is irrelevant? What we need to know is if there is a credible threat against Earth?"*

*"Mr Ambassador,"* the radio crackled. *"I will tell you the same message I told President Addison: To the best of our knowledge, the answer is, no, there is no immediate threat. This kind of hysteria is the very reason why the blackout was imposed. I may not agree with the President's decision to arm the Orion, but I understand why he kept this discovery secret."*

The anger in the ambassador's voice rose above the unrest in the room.

*"You have no right to act on behalf of humanity without the consent of the United Nations. You think you rule the world, that you are best placed to make decisions for the rest of us, but you have no right to represent mankind as a whole."*

An uproar broke through the crowd.

*"We thought we were doing what was right. We thought we were doing what was in the best interests of humanity."*

More yelling erupted.

*"What would you have done?"* asked Dupree, his voice carrying above the confusion simply because of his microphone. He was yelling above the noise. *"What could you have done if you'd known? It's easy to criticize our actions in hindsight, but we did what we thought was best. We had to ensure stability. We wanted to prevent panic. You don't yell fire in the middle of a crowded movie theatre unless there's no other alternative. We wanted to avoid inducing fear in the general populous. We wanted to avoid a global meltdown of confidence."*

*"What arrogance?"* cried the ambassador. *"You thought you could contain this forever? You thought no one else would discover the craft? The*

*alien spaceship threatens all of mankind, not just the US."*

*"But it's not a threat,"* Dupree pleaded. *"Don't you see? They weren't using the sun to cover their approach, they were using the sun to slow down, they swung around the sun to shed their excess speed. They always intended to come to a rest beside us. They—"*

A squawk on Jameson's handheld military radio snapped the three of them back to reality. They weren't sitting in the safety of the US heartland listening to some theoretical debate. They were in Africa, in a country smoldering, about to burst into civil war.

"Sarge? This is Mathers. I've got two vehicles approaching, maybe four clicks out. Looks like they've pulled off the road."

"Roger that," Jameson replied into the radio. Turning to Bower, he added, "You need to get your staff and patients ready for possible hostile contact."

With that, Jameson grabbed his M4 rifle and ran down to Elvis and Smithy, yelling at them to finish up and grab their weapons.

# Chapter 03: Tears

Darkness fell.

Nothing happened for several hours.

Sitting there with her back against a low stone wall, Bower struggled to deal with the tension. The night air was stuffy. A hot, humid breeze blew in from the west, negating the earlier, cooler breeze from the south. Dark clouds sat on the horizon. Flashes of lightning rippled above the hills. The crash of thunder was but a distant murmur, but it was growing louder as time passed. Bower wanted to feel the storm burst overhead, breaking through and bringing relief from the sweltering heat. With no word from the soldiers, all she could do was to sit tight and wait for the impending storm.

The moon rose after sunset, softening the night. Dark shadows stretched across the village. Huts and fences cast elongated shadows on the ground, appearing as silhouettes against the horizon. Occasionally, Bower caught a glimpse of movement and her heart stopped. The soft crackle of a radio would assure her she'd seen a soldier moving about the desolate village and not a rebel sneaking into the camp. The stars were radiant, with the planets Mars and Jupiter glistening like diamonds next to the Moon. Bower couldn't appreciate their beauty, her eyes barely noticed the fine pin-pricks of celestial light.

"What are they going to make of all this?" Kowalski asked, his back leaning against the low brick wall outside one of the huts.

They who? Bower vaguely wondered, but she was distracted, thinking about the patients who had fled, wondering how they were faring.

Bower and Kowalski had housed the remaining patients inside the empty huts, rigging mosquito nets over them.

The nurses and doctors wore long sleeve shirts with loose elastic bands around the wrist, along with gloves to protect their hands. In addition, they wore broad-rim hats with mosquito netting to protect the face and neck, but still mosquitos buzzed around trying to find a way in. They'd sprayed repellant, but Bower swore the mosquitos had come to savor the smell.

Bower missed Kowalski's question. She'd worked with him for the past six months, ever since he transferred from Sudan. Bower liked him, but she found it hard to understand what he said at times. Kowalski was originally from Czechoslovakia. His English was technically correct, but his speech was clipped. The rhythm with which he spoke and his sharp accent meant Bower had to concentrate

on his words or she'd miss his points entirely.

Kowalski pointed at the sky. "You think they'll think we're nuts?"

"They'd be right," she replied, casting her eyes up and recognizing the constellation of Orion.

"It must be quite something," he added, with his natural cadence slightly accentuating the close of each sentence. "Do you think they'll help us?"

"Well, if Africa is any yard stick to go by, it's clear we can't help ourselves. We can do with all the help we can get."

"Their space ship, what do you think it looks like?"

"I don't know. Big, I guess." Her mind cast back to the various radio broadcasts they'd listened to, and although there had been some mention of telescopes being pointed at the alien spaceship, there hadn't been any descriptions offered. Bower figured their little corner of the world was probably among the few places on Earth that hadn't seen any images of the alien spacecraft. In her mind's eye, she could imagine the hype and borderline panic that must be gripping the Western world with its 24x7 media frenzies. Overnight, such images would have become ubiquitous, with every television network pundit offering an opinion on the weird shapes. Bower could understand why NASA kept the alien presence secret for so long as the media had a way of encouraging hysteria.

"I think they come in peace," she added in soft tones. "Maybe it's just me reading my own hopes into their intents, but they have to come in peace. After all, they're intelligent, more intelligent than us. Anything else wouldn't make sense."

"Really?" Kowalski replied. "Technical achievements and intelligence are not synonymous. I mean, here we are, by far the most intelligent species on the planet, and we're forever waging war against ourselves. I don't know that intelligence counts for much. Look at the warring tribes of Africa, the tension between China and Japan, Israel and the Middle East, it seems we're all too keen to drive each other into the ground.

"To be more advanced doesn't mean someone's necessarily more intelligent. They may be advanced enough to cross the vast expanse of space, but I don't know that makes them any brighter than us, just as you and I couldn't be described as smarter than Galileo or Aristotle."

"Yeah, I guess not," Bower replied, surprised by the notion.

"If anything, technology allows us to be dumb without consequence."

Bower laughed, saying, "You think they're dumb?"

Kowalski laughed as well. "Not dumb, but there's a danger in reading too much into how technically advanced they are. Morals rarely keep up with technology, and collective intelligence can drop

away. As life becomes more abstract, more divorced from reality by technology, it's easy to lose sight of what's right and wrong."

"You think they're evil?"

"I don't know what to think. I doubt anyone does. And I doubt it's as clearcut as our black and white stereotypes portray. I mean, all we have to go on is Hollywood and their depiction of aliens with acid for blood and massive armies ready to invade the planet. So I guess my point is, any assumptions we come up with are probably going to be absurdly off-key. This morning, I doubt anyone expected ET to turn up on their doorstep, and yet, here he is."

Bower watched as Kowalski swatted a mosquito trying to get under the netting bunched loosely on his shoulder.

"Think about our fairytales," he continued. "Whether it's Snow White or Star Wars, there's always pure evil against naive innocence, the black knight riding against King Arthur, but real life is never that clear cut. Reality is complicated."

Bower lowered her voice, trying to sound masculine as she added, "Kind of like, Luke, I am your father."

Kowalski laughed, and she figured he appreciated the irony in how she chose a fictional example of the complexity he was describing. She knew precisely what he meant. Africa was neither black nor white. Some days the continent seemed nothing but a murky, thick-as-pea-soup grey.

Joking around with Kowalski help distract Bower from the tension of the night. Sweat dripped from her brow. Dark clouds swirled overhead, blocking the starlight. Humidity hung in the air. At any moment, the storm would break. She should have headed inside the hut but the nurses were quite capable of caring for the remaining patients. Besides, the tension of waiting for the unknown kept her outdoors. She had to know. Would the rebels attack? Or would they pass them by? One hospital and a couple of doctors were small fish in a big pond, and she knew it.

Suddenly, Bower was aware of someone beside her, a ghost resolving in the dark. Startled, she turned, on the verge of screaming. White eyes pierced the darkness. Jameson crouched next to her. His face was painted in a disruptive pattern, in jagged shades of charcoal and black. His radio crackled with a soft hiss.

"You scared the hell out of me," Kowalski said, expressing what Bower felt.

Jameson grinned, his teeth a stark contrast to the night. He handed them a couple of flak jackets.

"Here, put these on."

Bower slipped the Kevlar vest over her head as Kowalski asked, "No helmets?"

“No spares. Keep your head down and you won’t need one.”

“Thanks,” Bower said, feeling clumsy as she strapped the heavy vest in place. She’d worn Kevlar before in training scenarios, but never under fire.

Jameson spoke into his radio, saying, “Recon Sit Rep.”

Over the static, Bower heard, “I’ve got three parties in the scrub, at 11, 3 and 7. Over.”

“Roger that.”

Kneeling down beside them, Jameson drew a large circle in the dust with his finger. “They know there’s been an outpost here. They’re feeling us out, looking to see if anyone’s home, probing our defenses.”

“Where are they?” Kowalski asked.

“Imagine a clock, with high noon facing due north.”

He drew three lines, pointing at where the hours 11, 3 and 7 would have been if his circle had been a clock face.

“We’ve got movement at these locations. They’re spoiling for a fight.”

“What do we do?” Bower asked.

“Nothing.”

“Nothing?” she replied, incredulous. “You scared me half-to-death and now you’re telling me you’re not going to do anything about a bunch of murderous thugs creeping up on us in the dark?”

Her words were low, almost as though she were uttering something blasphemous.

“Rules of engagement. They haven’t demonstrated hostile intent. We have to wait for them to initiate contact.”

“They have us surrounded and that doesn’t bother you?” she asked.

Jameson pointed at the bulky contraption strapped to the front of his helmet. “Night vision. They think they’re moving in under the cover of darkness, but we hold the tactical advantage.”

“Do you have a gun I could use?” Kowalski asked.

“Have you ever fired a gun before?” Jameson asked in reply.

Kowalski paused slightly before answering. “My father took me hunting as a teen.”

“Well, no offense to you and your father, but combat is rather different to shooting at furry little animals that can’t fight back. You’re more likely to shoot one of us than you are one of them.”

“But we need to protect ourselves,” Kowalski replied. “What if we’re overrun?”

“You’ve got to trust us on this. Let us do our job.”

Kowalski didn’t look too impressed by that response.

“Listen Doc, if I come through this with a bullet in my ass, I promise, I won’t tell you how to do your job, OK? Right now, you’ve

got to let me do mine."

"Sure," Kowalski replied. From the subtle tone in his voice, Bower could tell his feathers had been ruffled.

"Have either of you been in a combat situation before?"

Neither Bower nor Kowalski answered verbally. They simply shook their heads.

"All right. You've got to prepare yourself for what could happen. You will hear gunfire. Don't freak out. Keep your head down. Stay low. If you need to move around, crawl. We're going to fire some illumination flares when contact commences, but that's not to light them up, it's to destroy their ability to see in the dark, make it harder for them to pick out silhouettes moving at night. It's a bluff, to mislead them, to make them feel like it's a fair fight. When it comes to warfare, there's no such thing as a fair fight, there's kill or be killed."

Bower nodded her head understanding she was being given privy access to the battle plan the Rangers had formulated.

"Rifle fire is loud. It's intimidating, overwhelming, but I want you to listen for something else. Try to ignore the gunfire and listen for the sound of any impacts near you."

She wasn't sure what he meant. Jameson must have picked up on that from the look on her face as he mimicked two distinctly different sounds.

"You'll hear something like ppft BANG, ppft BANG."

Bower screwed her face up.

"If you hear that, they're shooting at you. Remember, these guys are firing supersonic rounds, so you'll hear the round whiz pass and strike something near you before you hear the gunfire itself, ppft BANG."

Bower nodded.

"There's going to be a lot of noise, a lot of confusion. You'll swear someone's shooting at you, but don't freak out, listen for where the rounds are landing, listen for the impact. That's your best guide. There will be a lot of echoes, a lot of sound bouncing around off the mud huts, off the jungle, and that can be disorienting, confusing. Listen for impacts. If there's none, you're fine, they're not firing at you."

Kowalski nodded, which reminded Bower to nod as well. She felt like a school kid taking instruction from a Phys-Ed teacher.

"If you see poofs of dust or chips of mud and rock flying, the bullets are coming from the opposite direction, from roughly 180 degrees. Stay low.

"You're going to want to run, but don't. Don't try to get away. As tempting as it is, you don't want to run from gunfire as you'll make yourself an obvious target. Move closer. I know it sounds strange, but it's all about angles. If you move away from the shooter, in the

direction the bullets are traveling, you'll make yourself an easy target. You want to do the opposite. Move under cover toward the shooter as that destroys his angle. By moving closer you're moving up against an obstacle that hides you from sight. From there, crawl laterally, left or right, but stay out of sight.

"Remember, if you can hear gunfire those bullets have already passed you by. You'll flinch and duck but if they were on target they'd have hit you already.

"If you hear a whiz or a crack but no impact, they're shooting high and the bullets are flying past. Just stay low and don't panic.

"If there's a lull in the fighting, stay put. You'll just draw attention to yourself if you move around. We will come for you. We know where you are. We've aligned our fields of fire to cover this location, so don't leave here, if you do you could be hit by friendly fire as much as by rebel fire."

Bower swallowed the knot in her throat.

"Stay low. Don't panic," she repeated back to him, already feeling panicked. In her time in Africa, she'd had a few close calls with some of the tribesmen, but never anything that made her feel like she was in a war zone. With the UN presence, the civil war in Malawi had ground to a halt, but now she sensed some of the fear she'd seen in the villagers' eyes when she had first arrived.

"I need you to communicate this to your staff. OK?"

Jameson was looking into her eyes, his eyes darting between each of her eyes, looking to see if she understood. Bower felt out of her depth.

"OK."

"The rebels are undisciplined. They'll fire at shadows. They'll let off a long rat-a-tat-tat. If you listen, you'll hear us firing back, but our rounds are smaller and we're using muzzle suppression to avoid a flash that would give away our position. Our rounds will sound more high-pitched, like the crack of a whip. And you'll only ever hear the Rangers firing controlled bursts. Just one or two shots at a time, but don't worry about that. Firefights are about precision, not bluster. We'll only fire when we're on target, when we're sure of a hit. If you hear lots and lots of machine gun fire, don't be scared. Remind yourself, they're wasting ammo and they're giving away their position. If anything, they're making our job easier."

The radio crackled.

"I've got movement on the road," said a disembodied voice over the radio. Bower recognized Bosco's nasal twang. "Lone truck. One occupant, driver. Headlights off. Moving slow."

"Looks like they're delivering my spare parts," another voice replied. Bower thought it was Smithy, but she wasn't sure.

“It’s about bloody time.” That was Elvis. There was no mistaking his voice over the static.

Jameson spoke into the radio. “Warning shot. Single burst. Tracers over his head. Let them know we’re here. We’ll give them the opportunity to pull back.”

“Roger that.”

Jameson peered out over the low stone wall. He’d flipped his night-vision goggles down from his helmet, making him look more of a machine than a man. Bower couldn’t help herself, she had to look. She turned around, kneeling as she peered over the rough rocks. Kowalski stayed where he was.

Looking out through the night, Bower could see the landing zone to one side on a flat expanse before the dark jungle canopy. The truck Smithy had been working on had been moved into the village, hidden from the road by the crest of a small hill.

Her eyes struggled to make out any detail in the murky grey darkness. She could hear the rebel truck, but it still sounded several hundred yards away.

The night lit up briefly. For a second it was as though lightning had struck. Gunfire streamed out away from the village into the darkness. Tracer rounds snapped through the air, leaving reddish phosphorescent trails cutting through the pitch black of night. Thunder rolled around them. It took Bower a moment to realize the chesty thump was that of the machine gun firing and not the storm breaking. She was surprised to see the faint outline of one of the Rangers illuminated briefly by the outgoing tracer rounds. He was lying prone not more than thirty yards away. She’d expected him to be hidden rather than lying flat on the landing zone. No sooner had he fired than he was on the move.

“Spotting,” came the call over the radio. “Elvis, you are clear. Eleven is stationary. Looks like an observation post. One occupant.”

“I’ve got movement at three,” and Bower was able to pick out Smithy’s voice.

“I’ve got movement at seven,” another voice added over the radio.

“The truck’s conducting a three-point turn, pulling back,” Bosco said, his voice breaking up with static.

“Stand by,” Jameson said into his radio.

Bower was impressed by the clinical detachment Jameson had, reminding her of some of her senior lecturers at medical school, and how calmly they’d describe a complex procedure like a heart by-pass. She liked to think of herself as pretty calm and collected in the operating theatre, but the reality was that if an operation deteriorated on her she struggled under the pressure. She hadn’t lost a patient, but

she'd come close enough to walk out of theater with her hands shaking. In Africa, though, not losing a patient was nothing to brag about, the serious cases rarely made it as far as a field hospital.

Out of nowhere, a machine gun opened fire, raking the village.

Bower ducked, even though she knew it was technically too late. If she'd been the target she'd already have become a casualty, and that thought alarmed her. She'd treated plenty of bullet wounds and understood the damage a small piece of lead could do when accelerated faster than the speed of sound. Bower didn't fancy lying on a stretcher undergoing surgery in the middle of Africa and figured she'd keep her head down. Although she felt an impulsive desire to watch what was unfolding she knew there was nothing to see, just fleeting flashes in the darkness.

Jameson held his finger up.

"No zing. No ppft. This is a bluff, a fake, intended to draw us out and get us to expose our positions.

"They might be amateurs, but they're not dumb enough to mount a frontal assault across an open grassy field. Don't worry about this. It's a diversion while they conduct a flanking maneuver. They're trying to keep us preoccupied with a frontal attack while the real action comes from three and seven."

He was pointing as he spoke.

"Three is on the move," came as a crackle over the radio.

"Eleven is open," said another voice.

"Take him," Jameson replied, talking into the radio with no emotion at all. He could have been ordering pizza.

A single crack resounded through the night.

"Eleven down."

Bower struggled to swallow the knot in her throat. In those few seconds, she'd witnessed the death of a rebel. There were no theatrics, no drama. If anything, life seemed cheap; an entire life had been snuffed out as one would swat a fly.

As a doctor, Bower found herself wondering about 'eleven,' wondering if the shot had been instantly fatal. She'd didn't want to second guess the Rangers, but she doubted the man was dead just yet. There were very few places on the human body that would kill a man in an instant, and she found herself wondering about a rebel bleeding to death in the jungle foliage. Her interest wasn't some form of pseudo-emotionalism. Bower understood he'd brought this on himself, and yet she was trained to save life, it was hard to ignore that. In her heart, she'd never really made the connection that soldiers were trained to kill. Intellectually, she knew that, but reality struck her hard in those few moments sheltering there in the dark, leaning against the rough stone wall.

Jameson spoke into his radio. “I am en-route to three.”

Bower breathed deeply. Jameson rested his hand on her shoulder as he spoke, reassuring her.

“You’ll be fine. This will be over before you know it. Trust me.”

Bower nodded as Jameson slunk away, melting into the night.

One of the nurses appeared crouched in the doorway to the stone hut.

“I’ve got it,” said Kowalski, staying low as he darted over and into the hut, and with that Bower was alone.

Sweat ran down her forehead, soaking her collar. Her gloves were sticky and uncomfortable. The ground was rough. She shifted her weight, trying to clear away some of the smaller, gritty stones to make sitting there bearable.

Sporadic gunfire erupted around the outskirts of the village. Each shot felt as though it was directed at her. She winced, trying to curl up into a ball as she sat there, wanting to become so small as to disappear. There were no zings, no ppfts, she reminded herself. Wasting ammo, that’s how Jameson described it, just like fireworks on the Fourth of July.

A flash of lightning lit up the brooding clouds. Bower expected the crash of thunder to break a few seconds later, but the resounding boom was almost instantaneous, breaking directly over the village, shaking the ground. Bower jumped as the thunder rattled the village.

Large drops of rain began falling. At first, just one or two, but they struck her hat with unusual force. Within seconds, torrential rain fell. The temperature plummeted. Another bolt of lightning arced through the sky, followed by a thunderous crash that shook her to the bone. It seemed the heavens were at war with Earth, competing with the Rangers and the rebels. Through the deafening downpour, Bower could hear the crack of gunfire increasing in its tempo. An explosion erupted from the far end of the village, from what Jameson had labeled seven o’clock.

Bower wanted to run.

Even the relative safety of the dry hut held no allure. She wanted to run from the village and she struggled to control that compulsion.

Bower pulled off her hat, allowing the rain to wash over her hair and face. Sitting there in a puddle, tears rolled down her cheeks. She wasn’t sure why she was crying, and she doubted anyone would have noticed in the rain, but still she cried. Perhaps it was the release of tension brought on by the storm, but Bower felt silly, and that made her cry even more. She felt small, insignificant, helpless as the storm raged around her.

The rain eased a little, allowing the sound of the battle to reach her ears. She turned instinctively at the roar of an engine and saw the

rebel truck bounding up the muddy track. Flashes of light burst from the open flatbed. Ppfts and zings raced past her, but in the confusion she was powerless to do anything other than watch.

The truck lurched toward her, bouncing out of a rut and careening up the embankment towards the village. Dirt and mud flew through the air, being dislodged by the truck's bumper as it caught the soggy ground. Bower found herself sprayed with mud as the truck slammed into the low stone wall and came to a thundering halt.

The door to the cabin of the truck swung open. A rebel slumped to the ground, dead. His body landed in the puddle on the other side of the low wall.

Bower jumped at the nightmare unfolding before her, her body repulsed by the shadow of death looming over the village.

A bloody arm hung down off the back of the flatbed truck.

Bower watched as the arm twitched.

Slowly, the wounded rebel on the back of the truck got to his feet. He staggered against the cabin, using it for support as he stood on the wooden deck. Through the sound of the rain, Bower could hear him swearing, cursing some African god.

Their eyes met.

Neither the darkness nor the rain hid her from his gaze. He saw her crouching there beside the stone wall, paralyzed with fear. His eyes widened. Smiling, he grabbed an AK-47 from where it lay on the deck of the truck.

A flash of lightning illuminated the village, turning the night into day for the briefest of moments.

Bower watched in horror as the rebel brought his rifle to bear, pulling back on the bolt to load a round into the chamber.

The crack of thunder shook the earth as the rebel's chest exploded, a bullet tearing through the muscle, sinew and bones, coming from somewhere behind him. The rebel fell into the darkness, disappearing from sight. Demons moved around her, dark specters sinking back into the night.

Her heart raced. The hair on the back of her neck stood on end. She looked around and as suddenly as it had come the violence was replaced with the soft patter of rain.

Bower stood there in the drizzle.

She shouldn't have stood. She wasn't even sure when she'd stood up, but somehow she was standing there by the low, stone wall. Something told her to stay down, and yet terror seized her muscles, refusing to let her crouch close to the earth.

Someone was screaming, a woman. The pitch of the woman's voice was unearthly, piercing the night, a banshee howling with the wind. Bower felt a sense of dread washing over her, an expectation of

the worst, that she would die here in Africa.

A hand grabbed her shoulder and she jumped.

“Hey, it’s OK,” said Kowalski. “It’s me. Come with me.”

And Kowalski led her away into the hut. It was only then that Bower realized she’d been the one screaming.

# Chapter 04: Las Vegas

Bower didn't know what time it was when she woke, but the sun was rising in the sky, creeping across the mud floor of the hut. She was lying on a blanket, with a rolled-up jacket as a pillow. The ground beneath her felt uncomfortably hard.

The hut was empty. Bower could hear Kowalski outside talking with one of the patients. Her neck was sore. She sat up, feeling stiff.

"The axle's fucked," yelled one of the soldiers. "Goddamn it, Bosco, can't you do anything right. You fuck up the radio, you fuck up our transport. What is it, man? Are you determined to bury us in Africa? Those nice rebels deliver us a perfectly good truck and you shoot it to shit."

Several other soldiers laughed, making fun of Bosco.

Bower staggered to the door of the mud hut and saw Smithy examining the truck that had crashed into the wall the night before. The front wheels had ridden up over the crushed stone wall, dropping the chassis down onto the rocks and breaking the front axle. Hydraulic fluid mixed with oil as it seeped out on the ground. Already, the sun had dried the puddles of water lying around the village. Cracks formed in the hardening mud.

"Hey," Kowalski said, coming over to her and offering to help her walk to where Jameson was sitting on the remains of the wall.

"What the hell happened to me?"

"You were shaking, mumbling. Your eyes were dilated."

Bower was silent, she knew what he wasn't saying, 'You were in shock.'

Kowalski handed her a water canteen.

"I gave you a sedative."

"You gave me a headache."

"That too. I thought it was best to let you sleep."

"Good morning, Sunshine," Jameson said as Bower wandered past. It must have been somewhere between ten and eleven judging from the angle and heat of the sun.

Bower was in no mood for small talk. She splashed water on her face, running her hands up through her hair, feeling a matted tangle on one side. She tried not to think about what she looked like, knowing she must look a mess.

"Sleep well?" Jameson asked.

"My head feels like someone's been hitting it with a jack-hammer. I have a hangover without touching a drop of wine. Is there any fate worse?"

Bower squinted, noticing her backpack sitting on the grass beside

the soldier's gear. After rummaging through her pack she found a pair of sunglasses and a hat.

"Oh, that is so much better," she mumbled.

Stretching her back, she looked around at her patients. One of the nurses had cooked up some maize and was dishing out bowls to the patients. They were merrily chatting with each other. Kowalski went back to examining the premature baby, listening to its heartbeat and respiration with a stethoscope.

"Did I miss something?" Bower asked, sitting beside Jameson.

The bodies were gone. There was no blood. If it weren't for the holes where bullets had punctured the thin sheet metal on the side of the truck, she'd never have known there had been a firefight the night before. Villagers crashed trucks all the time, normally not this badly, but it was a common sight. This could have been any other day.

"We routed the enemy around 0100." Jameson was clinical in his description of what had happened the night before. "Fourteen combatants neutralized. We estimate the rebel strength at no more than forty."

"Was anyone hurt?" As the words left her lips she realized the assumption in her question, that it was only US troops that could feel pain. The enemy was depersonalized, as though they felt no more pain than a cow being led to slaughter. And yet she didn't correct herself. He had to know what she meant. He had to agree.

"We came through the fight with little more than scratches. Bosco's radio, though, didn't fare as well. It took some shrapnel from a fragmentation grenade."

Elvis was rummaging around under the hood of the rebel truck. Although Bower had seen him running wires back to the flatbed trailer, it never occurred to her to ask what he was doing. She assumed he was doing something to help Smithy, who had brought the other truck over and was trying to salvage parts.

Elvis stood on the back of the damaged truck holding a microphone. A cable led down to an old metal speaker, the kind used on military parade grounds.

"Bright lit city," resounded from the speaker. Bower was surprised by the resonance in his voice. Singing a cappella, without any accompaniment, Elvis sounded surprisingly good. His voice had a natural vibrato, wavering softly as he sang the Elvis Presley classic, Viva Las Vegas.

"I've been burning all my money, with flames so high they'll never go out."

Bower laughed, he was getting the lyrics wrong, but that didn't seem to bother him. She wasn't sure if it was nerves or not, but she couldn't imagine Elvis didn't know the lyrics. Perhaps he wasn't the

extrovert he made himself out to be.

Elvis was posing as he sang, with one arm outstretched and his legs shaking in time to some unheard beat. Then again, she thought, perhaps he is an extrovert, but he's pulling a mental blank with everyone staring at him.

"There's a hundred thousand pretty ugly women somewhere the hell out there, and they're all living, but why should I care."

"Goddamn it, Elvis," yelled Jameson. "If you're going to torture us, at least get the fucking words right."

It was then Bower realized, Elvis knew the lyrics, he was teasing them, tormenting his squad with his ham-acting.

Smithy cried, "Get your ass down from there before someone shoots you."

"Before I shoot you," Bosco added.

"And a devil like me's got money to spare, so take me to Las Vegas."

Smithy yanked the wires from the battery, killing the microphone.

"Oh, not fair," Elvis cried.

"You stupid, dumb, hick, fuck farmer," Smithy yelled, her hands set firmly on her hips. "What the hell are you trying to do, bring in every goddamn rebel for miles around?"

"Hell no, he was scaring them off," Bosco replied.

Elvis laughed, dropping down off the truck and landing with a thud, his combat boots crunching on the ground.

"Is he all right?" Kowalski asked softly, his head appearing between Jameson and Bower as he leaned forward from behind them. "Post-traumatic stress?"

"Oh," Bower replied. "I'd say this is a baseline normal response from Elvis."

"Yee-haw," yelled Elvis, grabbing his hat and his sunglasses from the front of the truck. "Come on, Smithy, we need to get this show on the road. There are tour-dates to be kept. Fans to please. When are you gonna get me mobile?"

"You're an idiot," Smithy replied, laughing. Elvis didn't seem to mind.

Kowalski headed back over to the patients. Jameson sat there grinning.

"I don't know how you guys do it," Bower said. "I mean, I was terrified last night, but you can just switch this on and off at will."

"You get used to it," Jameson replied. "But the team needs to blow off some steam from time to time. It's healthy."

"As healthy as you can get in the midst of madness," Bower added.

Jameson never replied, and Bower knew she'd struck a raw nerve. There was only so much bravado one could hide. She may not have handled combat well, but she understood hers was an outward meltdown. Soldiers had inward reactions every bit as crippling, it was just easier for them to wear a mask and walk away.

"We'll be ready in about an hour," Smithy said, grabbing some unrecognizable part from the rebel truck. Wires and fine tubes dangled from a rusting metal cylinder.

"So what do we do without a radio?" Bower asked.

"We stick to the plan," Jameson replied. "Ordinarily, we'd stay in the area and wait 48 hours for a lost comms protocol to kick in, but I doubt they'll send choppers into a hostile LZ. Within 48 hours this place is going to be crawling with rebels. If we don't get on the move, and soon, we're not going to have to worry about forty rebels, we'll have four hundred to deal with."

"Hey, I'm getting a fresh signal on the commercial band," said Bosco, staggering past with the shattered remains of the military radio slung over his shoulder and the small public radio in his hand. He dropped the damaged military radio on the grass beside the other backpacks and sat down with the small, blue radio.

"It's the BBC," he said rather triumphantly.

*"Although we have no idea about the nature of our celestial visitors, we can infer some valuable information from what we have observed so far."*

The reception was much clearer than the night before.

*"I have here a bullet, just the lead projectile that comes flying out of a gun, not the casing with its powder and detonation cap. And, as you can see, I can toss this bullet in the air and catch it without any concern for my safety. But why? Bullets are dangerous, right? Well, no. Bullets are only dangerous when they're traveling at high velocities."*

He wasn't wrong there, thought Bower.

*"Standing here before you, I can toss this bullet up and down, catching it in my hand without any danger at all. But, if I fire this bullet from a gun, imparting a massive amount of kinetic energy into the metal and lead, accelerating it to a thousand feet per second, it would pass straight through my hand, probably straight through my body.*

*"In the same manner, the alien craft had to decelerate as it entered our solar system. Just the tiniest speck of dust or rock would be damaging. Given the sheer amount of kinetic energy within the alien craft, if they meant us harm, they need only have continued on at high speed. Even a small craft, perhaps the size of this building, traveling at three-quarters of the speed of light, would be enough to destroy all life on Earth. There's just so much energy involved. But they slowed to a stop relative to Earth. That act in itself tells us something of their intentions. They intend to come in*

*contact with us, not to destroy us."*

Bower was fascinated. It was clear they'd dropped into the middle of an ongoing technical discussion about the alien spacecraft. Some of the details were a repeat of what they'd heard the previous night, but with additional insights. For a second, all her cares dissolved. The tension of the previous night dissipated like a dream.

*"Question from the floor: Ambassador Philip Cohern, Canada."*

*"Where have they come from?"*

*"Unfortunately, we don't know. As the craft passed Neptune, some four light hours from Earth, it conducted a course correction, aligning with the ecliptic within our solar system, allowing it to move on the same plane as the planets. As best we understand its current trajectory, this would have been one of a number of course corrections to slowly orient with our solar system. We have a rough understanding of its origin in the southern hemisphere, but only a rather vague notion of either Triangulum, Pavo or Telescopium."*

*"Are those real constellation names?"* the ambassador asked. *"I thought the constellations had names like Aries or Gemini?"*

*"These are real names,"* the speaker confirmed. *"Triangulum may not have any exotic meaning like Scorpio, but it is a legitimate constellation, first identified by the Greek astronomer Ptolemy well before the birth of Christ."*

*"So this… this thing,"* the ambassador asked. *"Tell us more about what NASA observed as it approached Earth."*

*"The craft did not approach Earth directly. It passed through the inner solar system, swinging around behind the sun and slowing before it approached Earth. At the phenomenal speed with which it initially approached our solar system, the alien craft would have arrived here within a few hours, perhaps a day or so. But it slowed its approach, shedding its kinetic energy, taking over six months to reach us. But I must stress, covering this kind of immense distance in less than several years is phenomenal in itself. As it was, the craft arrived at Lagrange point five trailing Earth just eight days ago and has remained stationary in that location since then."*

*"Could you expand upon what a Lagrange point is for the assembly?"*

*"Sure,"* the scientist replied. *"We think of outer space as empty, but it's not. Gravity shapes space, molding it into what could be figuratively described as different forms, different shapes. Think of a street map. Maps show us how to get from one place to another, but maps are flat, they don't reveal the hills and gullies that define the land, and so we make topographical maps, maps with wavy lines to indicate the contours of the land. In much the same way, we see space as flat, but the gravitational attraction of the Sun, Moon and Earth means we need a topographical view of space, something to show us the gravitational hills and gullies. A*

*Lagrange point is an area that acts like a hilltop. From a Lagrange point, any which way you move is down, as you're pulled by the influence of gravity."*

*"And so this is expected?"*

*"I don't know about expected, but it's smart. They're sitting a way off, in a place from which they can easily go anywhere. They can come to Earth, go to the Moon, or retreat into interplanetary space with ease, with a minimum of effort."*

*"So you'd say this is a defensive position rather than an offensive one?"*

*"I… I don't know," the scientist replied. "I don't know that it makes any sense to draw military parallels with their location. It could be neither offensive nor defensive, just practical."*

*"What do you think their next move will be?"*

*"Well, I doubt they came here for sightseeing. They didn't just happen to cruise into our solar system, they were always headed for Earth. They knew exactly where they were going long before we ever saw them. I think it only makes sense to assume they'll make contact."*

*"How?"*

*"Mr. Ambassador, I'm a scientist, not a soothsayer. We'll have to wait and see."*

*"Humor me,"* the ambassador said. *"What's the most likely scenario?"*

*"There's no likely scenario. We're in uncharted territory. We think they picked up on our electromagnetic radiation, our TV and radio signals as they have been beamed into space over the past century, but they've made no effort to communicate with us via radio waves and have ignored our attempts to dialogue."*

*"And how have you tried to open dialogue?"*

*"With crude methods, with communication akin to the semaphore used between naval vessels in World War I. Just flashes of light deliberately sweeping across their craft, but following a pattern of prime numbers. All we're looking for in return is an acknowledgement on the same frequency, but there's been nothing. It's like they're not listening, which is counterintuitive given they've just flown dozens of light-years to get here."*

*"And what do you make of that?"*

*"I think the only thing we can make of it is that their ways are not our ways, their mode of communication has nothing in common with ours. And it's for this reason, I support the launch of the Orion, as our physical presence in space would be something they would recognize."*

*"Oh,"* the ambassador replied, *"But there's a danger they could interpret our launch as a hostile act."*

*"I don't think that's likely. They would have already observed that we have thousands of satellites in orbit, that we have a manned space station,*

*that we have deep space telescopes like the James Webb, so they know we're capable of space flight. Even though we've developed nuclear weapons, it's not likely we could be a serious threat to them. If their shielding can protect them from the fusion of interstellar hydrogen into helium, a nuclear bomb is going to be like a firecracker."*

*"So you disagree with the Addison initiative?"*

*"Absolutely. Nuclear weapons are so devastatingly effective on Earth because there's stuff to push around, air that can be super-heated and compressed, but in space, they're little more than fireworks."*

Another voice broke in over the top of the discussion.

*"We interrupt this special session at the United Nations to bring you news from Washington DC, where NASA special liaison Jonathan McKinsey has just announced that the alien craft is in motion, moving in an arc toward Earth. If the initial course is held, NASA expects the craft to enter a stable orbit some eight hundred to one thousand miles above Earth's surface within the next day."*

The radio transmission was confused. There were several voices talking in the background. Bower could make out terms like perihelion and apogee from a female voice, but it was the drone of a monotonous male voice mumbling in different languages that spooked her.

*"Nous venons en paix… Veniamo in pace… Ons kom in vrede… Ni revenos en paco… Wij komen in vrede… Wir kommen in Frieden…"*

*"As you can hear,"* the commentator continued, speaking over the top of the voice. *"The craft has begun transmitting a single phrase at 1420 MHz, a phrase repeated over and over again in every known language on Earth, a phrase with only one, unmistakable meaning."*

*"Vimos en paz… Erchomaste se eirini… Dumating kami sa kapayapaan… Nou vini nan lape… We come in peace… Rydym yn dod mewn heddwch… dolazimo u miru…"*

The radio commentator was silent, allowing the gravity of the moment to be conveyed in the rhythmic repetition of that phrase in multiple languages. The slow, plodding words cast a spell over Bower, leaving her in a trance. In the background, she was vaguely aware of the sound of a truck engine starting up and soldiers hollering.

Jameson said something, but she was barely aware of his words. He tapped her knee, saying, "We need to get the hell out of here before the rebels return in force."

Bosco switched the radio off and Bower found herself snapped cruelly back to Africa.

"Time to get this show on the road," yelled Elvis. "We're going to Vegas, baby, Vegas."

# Chapter 05: Hotel Ksaungu

The road to Ksaungu was full of refugees fleeing the fighting in the rural areas. They marched along the sides of the rough dirt track, spilling into the single lane as they herded goats and cattle before them. Men, women and children called out, pleading to be taken on board the Rangers' Hummer and the truck, but the soldiers were firm, shouting at the stragglers, peeling their hands away from the back of the truck and watching as they collapsed to the ground, still appealing to the soldiers.

"Surely, we can take some of them," Bower said, sitting in the cab of the truck with Elvis driving and Jameson riding shotgun.

Elvis was quiet.

Jameson looked at her with eyes that pierced her soul, and for a moment she wasn't sure if he was going to say anything at all. It seemed his silence spoke loudest, saying what she already knew, that it was a futile effort. Within minutes, they could be joining the refugees on foot if the engine on the truck gave out, and adding more people would only hasten that moment. Besides, who should they save? Those who shouted loudest? Those who pushed and shoved others out of the way? And why these people? What about others further down the road? Were they any less deserving? It was easy to drive on, these people weren't in any immediate danger, and yet she couldn't escape the feeling that they were somehow condemned to death.

"We can fight a battle," Jameson finally said. "But we cannot fight a war."

Bower was silent. Jameson examined a map of Ksaungu, talking to Elvis about their approach to the city and possible exit routes if they came under rebel fire. He settled on the Hotel Ksaungu as somewhere they could rest and take stock of the situation. He said it had been used by the Press Corps and would have good connections.

Government forces pushed north against the human tide flowing south, waving at the US Rangers and calling out as they drove past. They didn't seem too bothered by the US soldiers heading away from the battle. Government troops sat on tanks, in the back of trucks and on top of armored personnel carriers, smoking and joking, yelling and laughing.

After an hour or so, as the Rangers moved further down the road, Bower noticed the civilians became more subdued. They no longer clambered to get on board the truck. They shuffled along the road, numb to the exodus forced upon them. In some ways, their sullen demeanor was more alarming than the almost riotous villagers further

north. They seemed to have lost the will to fight and were trudging on instinctively rather than with purpose.

"Hey, what about them fucking aliens," Elvis said, half leaning on the steering wheel as their truck crawled along at barely fifteen miles an hour, bouncing in and out of potholes.

Bower was seated between Elvis and Jameson. She turned to Elvis, surprised by how he'd blurted this out. For the most part, their conversation so far had been subdued, but Elvis wasn't one to stay subdued for too long.

"I mean, what a load of bullshit. 'We come in peace,' yeah, right. Like anyone's going to believe that."

"But they do come in peace," Bower cried, somewhat confused by how Elvis could assume anything else. How could he assume the worst? Was she being naive? No, she thought.

"Come on, Doc. Don't tell me you believe that horse-shit. No one comes in peace. Hell, look at us. We're peacekeepers, and we blow shit up all the time."

Elvis laughed.

"They're not like us," Bower protested, although she knew her protest was irrational in that it wasn't based on anything other than her gut feeling.

"How do you know that? Maybe they're just like us. I mean, think about it, what is peace? I'll tell you what peace is, peace is an illusion, a dream. We came in peace at Plymouth Rock, and look how that turned out for the Indians. You wanna know what peace is, Doc? Peace is conquest. Peace is submission."

Jameson was quiet. Bower looked over at him, looking to see if he was going to come to her defense. He raised his eyebrow as if to say, you're on your own on this one.

"Peace is important," Bower replied, not sure quite what else to say to Elvis.

"Oh, I don't doubt that, Doc. But whenever you get two parties together with differing viewpoints, differing opinions, there will never be peace. If there is peace, it will come because one group has subdued the other by force of arms."

Bower was silent.

Elvis continued.

"You think that's what they mean to do, Doc? To subdue us? To force peace upon us? Just like we have brought peace to Africa with a gun? How well do you think that's going to go down in the US?"

Elvis laughed. His teeth were pearly white. From this angle, he really did look a little like Elvis Presley, with his baby face, his full cheeks and wavy hair.

"I tell you, Doc. Anyone that thinks these guys come in peace is

kidding themselves. No one comes in peace. They bring peace as they always have, with a sword.

"Seriously, what do you think civilization would be like without the police? Without someone to enforce peace?

"Nah, I reckon those big green bugs know exactly what they're doing. They'll come down here with their silver flying saucers and ray guns and leave us in pieces."

He laughed yet again. This was a joke to him. Although he'd raised some genuine concerns, his interest was fleeting.

"My pappy saw a UFO once," he continued. "Damn thing took one of our cows. We found a shredded cow skin the next day. No meat, no bones, just the flayed, bloody skin hanging on a barbwire fence. You think it's the same ones? Like a scout ship or something? Sent ahead to find out our weaknesses. Or maybe there's more of them. You know, like on Star Trek and stuff. Lots of different aliens from different places."

Bower didn't know where to begin.

"Do you think they can read our minds?"

"If they can," Bower replied, seizing the opening. "They won't find much."

Elvis burst out laughing, slapping the steering wheel. He smiled at her. Bower was surprised; she'd expected him to be offended.

"So what of it, Doc? Why aren't they talking to us. You know, like you and I are. Why not just come down here and say, 'Hi, I'm Marvin the Martian,' or whatever, and talk properly with us?"

"It's not that simple," Bower replied. "Before going to Med School, I studied to be a vet. I made it through my first year, but my heart wasn't in it. I realized I wanted to help people."

Elvis nodded his head thoughtfully. Jameson was content to listen.

"My father was a microbiologist, always talking about chemistry and how molecules formed proteins, sugars and acids, but that was too abstract for me. He wanted me to follow in his footsteps, but I liked to work with things I could touch. Somehow, medicine seemed more real when stitching up a wound on a patient. Anyway, one of my first year veterinarian courses was on animal psychology. I got to work with cats, dogs, dolphins, cows, you name it."

Elvis laughed. "So you put a dolphin on a couch and ask it about its childhood?"

"Something like that," Bower replied, feeling the tension between them softening. She'd taken Elvis the wrong way. There was nothing malicious about him. He was just a good-old-southern-boy. He would probably like grits with a side of bacon and eggs for breakfast every day of his life if given the chance.

“You see, we talk to animals all the time, thinking they understand us, but they don’t. They see the world through a different lens. There’s no doubt they’re intelligent, and that they think for themselves, but they don’t see the world as we do. You’ll never catch a cow admiring a beautiful flower, or a dog stopping to enjoy a radiant sunset.

“We tend to project our own emotions and feelings onto animals, but its one way traffic. You and I see a dog as part of our families, the dog sees itself as part of a tribe, an inter-species animal pack. And just like a wild pack, your dog will want to know where it sits in the hierarchal order. You may think of it as being on the bottom rung, but I doubt it does, especially if you have young kids. You might think you’ve got your dog well-trained, but he thinks he’s domesticated you.”

“Hah,” Elvis cried. “My pappy’s dog definitely thinks he rules the roost. He’ll chew anything in sight, and sit up on the couch like he owns the joint.”

“Dogs have emotions, though,” Jameson countered. “They genuinely care about us, right?”

“Oh, they do,” Bower replied. “But through the lens of their nature, not ours. They show empathy when people are distressed, but emotionally they never really develop beyond that of a two or three year old child.”

“What about cats?” Jameson asked.

“Domestic cats are different. Apart from lions, there are no cats that move in packs, so they see their inclusion in a family as being part of a litter, and as such there will be parents and other kittens, your children. When your cat brings a live mouse into the house, they’re trying to teach you and your kids how to hunt. They must think we’re stupid when we never catch any mice of our own.”

“Damn,” Elvis said, laughing as he chewed on some gum.

“A few years ago, a bunch of divers freed a sperm whale from shark nets off the east coast of Australia. From memory, there were five or six divers. Anyway, once the whale was free it swam up beside each of them individually and took a good look at them. It drifted up to their boat, stuck its head out of the water and looked at the support crew on deck. It was, by all accounts, a moving experience. Those divers came away saying they felt the whale expressed a sense of gratitude and appreciation, but they simply projected their own emotional expectations onto the animal.”

“How do you know for sure?” Elvis asked. “Maybe the whale was thankful to be rescued.”

Bower laughed, saying, “Because, if they’d rescued a polar bear from a similar predicament, the bear would have eaten them.”

“I don’t know about that, Doc,” Jameson replied. “I remember seeing a documentary on PBS about that, and the guy that cut the whale loose said it was nervous as hell at first, treating them like sharks or something, but once he started cutting the whale loose she calmed down. He said working with the whale was like soothing a rattled horse.”

Bower listened intently. “Oh, there’s no doubt whales are intelligent, but the whale’s response could just as well have been one of astonished bewilderment, curiosity or disbelief as much as gratitude.

“You see, the point is, these are our emotions, not theirs. If those divers had freed a hungry Great White Shark it would have probably attacked them, but if it hadn’t been hungry, it too could be described as grateful. The reality is, those divers freed a mostly docile aquatic mammal, one that doesn’t have Homo sapiens on the menu.”

“Isn’t it a matter of degrees?” Elvis asked. “I mean, a cricket’s smarter than a rock. A lizard is smarter than a cricket. A dog is smarter than a lizard, and on a good day, I’m smarter than my dog.”

Jameson laughed. “You wish.”

“Haw haw,” Elvis cried, laughing in his southern accent.

“In some regards, it is a matter of degrees,” Bower replied. “As there’s no doubt a doe cares for a newborn fawn, but too often we read too much into these behaviors. Chimpanzees share 98% of our DNA, but that doesn’t make them 98% human. We’re not the benchmark other species are trying to attain in terms of their intelligence and emotions. They’re quite happy being themselves.

“There’s little in the way of common ground between us and other animals. Think about dolphins. Cute, cuddly, friendly dolphins. Everyone loves dolphins, right? They’re the good guys of the ocean. And yet for all we think we know about them, we really don’t understand them at all. Dolphins will gang-rape females for days on end. Rival males will kill newborns to bring a female back in heat. As playful as they seem in a dolphin show, as intelligent as they appear, they’re not people, and we shouldn’t treat them as such. Our morals, our values simply do not apply to them.”

“I can’t believe you’re picking on dolphins,” Elvis quipped. “Don’t they save swimmers by dragging them to shore?”

Jameson added, “Yeah, but you never hear about the people they drag out to sea.”

Elvis laughed.

Bower continued, saying, “Try as we may, we can’t imagine life as a bat, relying on sonar rather than sight. We can’t imagine sensing electrical fields like a shark, or being a spider that sees four primary colors rather than three. In the same way, animals cannot imagine

being human. We can teach chimps to use sign language, we can teach parrots to hold a conversation, but they're adopting human precepts, not inheriting them as a child would.

"Think about it. Does a dog care who's President of the United States? Does a cat care how much you earn? Does a goldfish know if you're married or single?

"We surround ourselves with artificial constructs, things we think are real, and these influence our sense of culture, they carry emotional weight, and yet they're meaningless to other animals."

"And you think these aliens are like animals?" Jameson asked.

"Not terrestrial animals. But if we can't communicate openly with any other species on our planet without reading our own emotions into their responses, what chance do we have of talking to beings from another planet? And what chance do they have of talking to us without there being some kind of misunderstanding?"

"None," Elvis replied grinning. "If any UFOs touch down south of the Mason-Dixon line, they're gonna regret cashing in those frequent-flyer miles."

"You've got to see this from their perspective," Bower added. "Saying, 'We come in peace,' is probably all they could say without someone, somewhere taking things the wrong way. And, even then, can you imagine the conspiracy theory nuts? Oh, they'll be swinging from the chandeliers."

"Oh yeah," Elvis said. "And I could name most of them. Ha ha."

Bower was excited about the conversation. The two soldiers might have had only a passing interest, but Bower was electrified to think about alien contact in detail. She made the point, "We don't just speak with words. Some scientists estimate that words make up only about half of any conversation. Most of what we say is conveyed by our posture, our body language, our tone of voice, our eyes. More than that, most of what we say is an extension of what has been said before. Saying, I love you to someone after screaming at them for an hour in an argument doesn't really mean anything, right?"

"So you think these aliens are going to have a hard time understanding us?" Jameson asked.

"We have a hard time understanding each other," Bower replied. "Our alien friends simply won't understand the subtleties and nuances of any one culture, let alone all of them. It doesn't matter how intelligent they are, it will take them time to figure out our quirks and idiosyncrasies. They know nothing of our culture and idioms.

"Someone from another world isn't going to understand how heavily laced our speech is with references to our senses. Can you see what I mean? Can you hear what I'm saying? Has someone touched a raw nerve? Do you smell a rat? Find something distasteful? They may

have none of these senses, so even our most simple sentences could be meaningless to them.

"Here on Earth, we have creatures with completely alien senses. Stingrays detect the sensitive electrical impulses of a heart beating beneath the sand. Bats build a picture of the world around them using sonar. Butterflies taste with their feet. Chameleons move their eyes independent of each other, giving them two views at once. Imagine how confusing any of these senses would be for us and you get an idea of how confusing our perspective could be be to visitors from another planet."

"So," Elvis said, "You feel these aliens will be alien in more ways than one?"

"Absolutely, they're aliens, right?" Bower asked rhetorically. "They're not movie-extras in cheap plastic suits.

"And as for feelings. Think about what feelings are. They're a figurative extension of what we feel physically through our sense of touch. What about concepts like art, music or religion? There's so much ground work that will have to be covered before we can even start to talk to ET about these subjects.

"No, I think our alien visitors have said just enough: We come in peace. It's not too little, it's not too much. It's just enough to let us know they're in the neighborhood."

"So how do we talk to them?" Jameson asked.

"Well, it's just a guess on my part, but I'd say through science. Regardless of which culture you're from, regardless of which planet you call home, two plus two equals four, hydrogen has only one proton, stuff like that. Science is universal, so it's the logical place to start. Oh, these are exciting days."

"Yeah," Elvis replied, sarcasm dripping from his words as he stared out across the dry savannah. "Real exciting."

An uneasy silence fell upon the cabin of the truck. Physically, the cabin still groaned and shook as the truck hit potholes and gravel flicked up to strike the underside of the vehicle, the old diesel engine rattled with a steady rhythm and the springs in the seats wheezed, but nothing more was said.

Although the skies were clear, Bower felt as though a dark cloud had descended upon them. Was she right? Or was pride obscuring her point of view? She'd been so passionate, so confident, but since when were those tools of scientific investigation? In 1616, the pope was convinced Galileo was wrong, calling his ideas foolish and absurd. Was Bower being just as bullheaded? Was her conviction blinding her? Was she afraid of being wrong?

Bower looked at Jameson. He was examining the map. He radioed something through to the Hummer, but she was barely aware of the

words leaving his lips.

The soldiers had deferred to her judgement, and why wouldn't they? They were men of war, not science, but as for her, she was a medical doctor, not a scientist. She understood the principles, but she had no reason to be so confident in her position. She sighed, knowing passion had got the better of her, hoping she was right but knowing hers was an opinion, nothing more.

Grasslands gave way to pockets of rainforest. Mud coated the track, making the drive difficult as the wheels slipped, and Bower had visions of trying to push the truck out of a ditch, but Elvis seemed to know when to drop down a gear and gun the engine so as to avoid sliding sideways into a rut.

For a moment, Bower dared to consider she could be wrong, and not just about her academic understanding in regards to the sentience of other animals, about everything. Life seemed as incorporeal as the mist in the early morning. Everything she knew growing up in Europe, or about medicine and science, or the bitterness of life in Africa, it all seemed surreal. She had awoken from a dream. Reality had arrived from the stars, and it scared her to realize that everything she knew, every aspect of life she trusted was as frail as a house of cards. Everything that seemed so important suddenly became trivial and insignificant. Earth was a mote of dust drifting in a sunbeam.

No one noticed when she shook her head softly, trying to clear her thoughts. Perhaps they did, but they didn't say anything. For her, those few seconds had been terrifying. She'd lost her grounding. Bower breathed deeply, suppressing the anxiety welling up within. She had to shut down this train of thought. She clenched her fists. Her nails bit into her palms, her forearms flexed, and slowly a sense of calm returned.

As the road dried out, Jameson and Elvis chatted idly about getting back to their base in Fort Benning, Georgia. They spoke with a sense of nostalgia, and yet Bower wondered if they were as enamored with the base when they were actually there. She doubted it. The grass was always greener on the other side of the fence. In some ways, she envied them. They had a common bond, something they could bullshit about to unwind, leaving her feeling like a spare wheel.

"So you think we're going to make it, Doc?" Elvis asked after a couple of miles, coming up with his question out of nowhere. Bower wasn't sure what he meant initially, but she could tell the question had been gnawing away at the back of his mind.

"Out of Africa?" she asked, wondering why he would ask her.

"No. I mean, are we going to make it through all this alien stuff?"

"I'm sure we'll be fine," she replied with the scholarly authority only a doctor can pull off with aplomb. She had no idea, but she

wasn't going to let him in on that. It was important to maintain the illusion, if only for herself. Bower was disappointed. She'd thrown up a facade. Was it fear or pride that had governed her response? She wasn't sure, and yet she felt she had to stay upbeat.

Positive expectations are important, she thought, rationalizing her position. All too often in her medical career she'd seen situations where the gravity of a medical emergency or a chronic disease looked hopeless, and yet she'd learned she can always give hope. It wasn't a case of lying, more of framing the truth in an optimistic manner.

Looking into the eyes of a patient and telling them they had a 50/50 chance at living was heartbreaking. It had to be done, of course. But knowing that your life had no better odds than that of a coin toss was earth-shattering. Hope was a placebo. Hope could tip the balance. Hope endured when the body faltered. Bower had seen hope pull patients through against the odds. But placebos only worked if you believed in them, if you were naive to reality. For Jameson and Elvis, her words were a placebo, for her they were a lie.

"The boys are taking bets on this being the end of the world," Elvis continued. "Three-to-one against the aliens being peaceful. The smart money says they'll attack."

"I'll take on those odds," Bower said in a show of bluster. "Put me down for twenty bucks on a nice, friendly neighbor. And if I lose, I doubt there will be anyone to collect."

Jameson laughed. He started to say something and seemed to think better of it.

"No, go on," Bower said, turning toward him, wanting to know what was so funny.

"There was another bet," he said. "That the Doc would side against an attack."

"And the odds," she asked, surprised to be at the center of a betting proposition.

"Lousy odds. A dollar to a dollar fifty."

"And which side were you on?"

"Oh," Jameson replied, lifting his hands in mock surrender. "Neither Elvis nor I would bet against you. And, hey, you came good."

Elvis laughed.

"This isn't the end of the world," Bower said, trying to convince not only Jameson and Elvis but herself. "This is just the beginning. In the centuries to come, this will be seen as the dividing line in history. There will be everything that happened before Contact and all that follows after. The implications are vast. Our science textbooks will become obsolete with all we stand to learn about the universe. The world has changed, and for the better."

She wanted to believe that, she had to believe that, anything else

would be to capitulate to fear.

Jameson leaned forward, pointing at Elvis as if to say, I told you so.

Elvis laughed, adding, “Oh, the world looks just as shitty today as it did yesterday, Doc.”

Bower went to say something but Elvis cut her off, saying, “I hope you’re right, I really do.”

“Me too,” she replied with a forced smile.

The drive to Ksaungu took six hours.

As they approached the city they could see smoke rising lazily in the air, dark black plumes hung above the distant buildings. Traffic was congested. All semblance of order had broken down. Cars, trucks and motorcycles clogged the roads and footpaths. Drivers honked their horns, yelling at each other, frustrated in the stifling heat. The stench of sewage sat in the air.

Bower had moved to the back of the truck during one of the bathroom breaks, giving Alile the chance to sit up the front with Jameson and Elvis. Alile had been reluctant, but Bower was insistent. There was no elite foreigners-only club, just humanity trying to survive its own best efforts at self-destruction, and besides, she could use the distraction of caring for others.

Bower sat in the back talking with Kowalski, the nurses and patients.

The rear of the truck was covered in a canvas tarpaulin. There was little to hold onto and Elvis wasn’t the most considerate of drivers. A slight breeze leaked in beneath gaps in the canvas near the cab of the truck. At the back, a canvas flap fluttered in the breeze, but dust kicked up by the tires swirled behind the truck, preventing them from opening the canvas up entirely.

For the most part, everyone was in high spirits, but the premature baby was unusually lethargic. He was on a drip, and Bower was worried about him. His mother sat there rocking with the motion of the truck, stroking the child’s head gently in the sweltering heat.

“Hey Doc,” Jameson yelled out, leaning out of the window and lifting the canvas. “There are signs for a Red Cross station up ahead. Looks like they’re as stubborn as you. We’re going to take your folks there, OK?”

“Yes. Please,” she called back over the sound of the diesel engine roaring as Elvis pulled out into heavy traffic, crossing a main thoroughfare.

The roads in Ksaungu were paved with asphalt, allowing them to open the canvas back and let air circulate more freely within the rear of the truck.

The buildings in Ksaungu were pockmarked with the scars of war.

Bullet holes straddled the rough concrete walls. Large chunks of masonry marred the streets, marking where tanks had once battled for control of this provincial capital. Power lines ran down one side of the street in absurd bundles of ten to fifteen wires running from lamppost to lamppost. Numerous other wires peeled away from the posts in what looked suspiciously like illegal wiring. At least, Bower thought it was probably unregulated, with little regard for safety, but in Africa that didn't mean it was an illegal tap. Amidst the cars and trucks, horse-drawn carts trundled along carrying vegetables and meats to the markets.

The impromptu Red Cross hospital had been set up in an abandoned train station. Several of the staff came out to greet them as they pulled up.

"Americans," one of the Red Cross doctors said in a distinctly Australian voice. "Well, you're a sight for sore eyes. I thought you'd all done a runner."

"We have," Jameson replied in a matter-of-fact tone of voice as he led the Australian around to the back of the truck. "But we had a bit of unfinished business. Had to get some civvies to safety."

"And you think Ksaungu is safe?" the Red Cross official replied.

"We're trying to get these folks to Mozambique," Bower said as she helped a patient down from the truck.

Jameson added, "We had in-country staff and patients we couldn't abandon. We're headed to Lilongwe for evac."

"Lilongwe?" the Red Cross doctor asked. "You might want to rethink your plans. Lilongwe is under siege by the rebels. Last I heard, several suburbs had fallen to the uprising but the government isn't giving up without a fight."

"What about the Red Cross?" Jameson asked as Bower stood beside him. "Are you pulling out?"

"We've removed all non-essential staff. If the fighting gets close, we'll pull back across the border, but for now, there's too much work to do."

Bower shook hands with the doctor, as did Alile. Kowalski wasn't bothered with pleasantries. He just waved as he moved the patients out of the sun into the shade of an overhanging first-floor patio.

"We're going to hole up in the Hotel Ksaungu," Jameson added. "And try to make contact with US forces at sea."

"Good luck with that," the doctor replied. "We haven't seen sight nor sound of US or UN forces since they announced that bloody alien spaceship had arrived."

"Do you have contact with anyone in Mozambique?" Bower asked.

"We have a couple of old buses making daily runs to the border.

We can get your people on one, so long as they're fit to travel."

"Wonderful," Bower replied, smiling. Alile smiled as well, but without the same measure of conviction.

Bower and Alile followed the doctor inside the Red Cross station. When she came outside an hour or so later, the sun was setting. The Rangers were lounging around, sitting on the hood of the truck or playing cards in the shade. Their M4 rifles were never out of arm's reach. The Hummer was gone, presumably to the hotel.

"So what's the plan, Doc?" Jameson asked. "Are you and Dr. Kowalski going to stay here with the Red Cross?"

She hadn't really thought about it, but Jameson was right. They were part of an NGO and not even from the same country as the Rangers. In that moment, she saw a glimpse of the valor with which the Rangers served. They had no official responsibility for her. They need not have escorted her to Ksaungu, let alone have hung around outside the makeshift hospital. Although with bands of thugs roaming the streets in pick-up trucks, brandishing automatic rifles, their presence had ensured the Red Cross outpost had remained orderly.

In private, Bower had previously been critical of the military intervention in Malawi, saying what was needed was civil engineers and teachers, not more guns and bombs, but now she saw things in a different light.

His was a good question, what were they going to do? In essence, Jameson was asking if she wanted to be released from his military care, and that was a novel thought, one with potentially profound implications.

Somewhat absentmindedly, she said, "Ah, I'm going to have to consult Mitch on that." And she turned and walked back into the rundown building.

Kowalski was working with Alile to clean out an infected wound on the leg of a young boy. Bower didn't recognize the boy; he must have been a local.

"Shrapnel wound. So bloody messy I can't tell if there's any metal still in there."

"Mitch," Bower said, and the tone of her voice got his attention. He seemed to understand what was coming next. "The soldiers need to move on. What do you want to do?"

You, it was a word pregnant with meaning. She hadn't said we, she already knew what she wanted to do, but she wanted to hear Kowalski's perspective. She liked to think he could persuade her to continue providing medical assistance at the makeshift hospital, but deep down she already knew she was going to leave with the soldiers. She was hoping he would say something that would make her decision easier, some justification she could cling to without feeling like a

traitor.

"I can't say I've ever been too fond of men marching around with guns," Kowalski replied. "But they saved our ass up there in Abatta."

He pulled his gloves off, took his glasses off and rubbed the bridge of his nose, lost in thought. He turned to Alile, saying, "Can you finish up?"

Alile just nodded.

Bower took a sip of water from her canteen.

"It's one of those moments, isn't it?" Kowalski said. "We're at a crossroad, where we can go one way or another, but it's a crossroad we can never revisit if we change our minds in the future. Right now, we can go on either path, but this luxury won't be around for long."

Kowalski had used the pronoun we in his reply. He was more circumspect than Bower. She struggled to swallow the lump in her throat.

"What do you think?" Kowalski asked.

Bower looked around. The field hospital was already overflowing. Patients lay on metal gurneys in the hallways, quietly enduring until someone could tend to them, although tending was a misnomer. Beyond basic surgery, cleaning and bandaging a wound, there wasn't a lot that could be done.

"I need a crystal ball," she said. "I mean, we're trying to make a decision based on information we don't have, information that can only come in the future. Will the government of Malawi prevail? Will all this play out in a matter of days or weeks? Or will the war be protracted and go on for years? Will the UN ever return, and if so, when? But perhaps most important, what difference will that bloody alien space ship make?"

Bower looked at Alile working away quietly on Kowalski's patient. Alile didn't have to say what she was thinking.

Neither Alile nor the boy could flee. The best they could hope for was to get across the border into Mozambique as refugees. They were trapped by the cruelest of circumstances beyond their control: the country in which they were born. Bower felt sick. What a stupid, fucked-up world, she thought, there was no merit, no compassion, no understanding, nothing any of them could do about this artificial distinction that could make the difference between life and death. That Alile's fate was arbitrary and whimsical was barbaric.

"You should go," said Alile in her distinct African accent. "You came here to help us with our mess. You have helped. You can do no more. You should go while you still can."

'Our mess,' there was another pronoun coming into play: you, we, our. Each pronoun revealed more about its speaker than Bower had ever realized before, although 'our' wasn't entirely accurate. Malawi

may have been where Alile was born, but the problems the country was going through had nothing to do with her personally, and Bower understood that. Her heart went out to the brave, young nurse. Bower could see Alile was being kind, giving them an out. The reality was, these artificial designations of country and race held no bearing other than what man made of them. Bower felt like a heel taking the easy way out.

"There is too much suffering in this country," Alile continued. "You have done all you can. But it is we who must end it. You can go. You should go."

Kowalski was silent.

"I will arrange for the others to go on to Mozambique tomorrow," Alile said.

"But what about you?" Bower asked.

"This is my country. If I leave then I am giving up on her. I cannot do that. If all the good people leave there will be no one left but the evil, and I cannot stand that thought."

Bower was silent.

Kowalski went to say something, but Alile cut him off with one, sharp word.

"Go."

It wasn't a request, neither was it an order. It was a plea.

Kowalski stood up, rubbing his hands over his face, rubbing his fingers in his eyes as though he were clearing out grit.

"Promise me," Bower said, talking to Alile. "Promise me you will leave before it's too late. Promise me you'll make a run for the border when the time comes."

"I promise."

Kowalski hugged Alile, which took the young lady by surprise. She held her hands away from his body so her bloodied gloves didn't mar his clothing. Kowalski didn't seem to care. His face was set like stone. Bower hugged the two of them, tears running down her cheeks.

After a couple of seconds, Kowalski pulled back. Bower stepped away as Kowalski took Alile by the shoulders saying, "With people like you, there is hope for Malawi."

Alile nodded.

Bower felt her lower lip wavering as she went to say goodbye. The words never came. She leaned in and kissed Alile on each cheek.

"It is OK," Alile said. "You have done more than could have been asked of you. Thank you. One day, Malawi will be free, and we will meet again."

Bower acknowledged her without saying anything. Words felt cheap.

She and Kowalski stepped out into the twilight as the Hummer

pulled up, parking in front of the truck. Walking down the stairs leading out of the station, Bower felt as though she was sinking deeper in despair with each downward step. She'd done all she could for Alile and the other staff and patients, and yet guilt gnawing at her heart condemned her for leaving them.

"This is shit," Kowalski said, turning to Bower as they walked toward the waiting soldiers. "Some bloody world we live in. Someone comes from another world to visit, and we abandon each other, we panic and abandon our sense of humanity. What did these aliens come to see? Mindless animals? Because that's all there is here, that's all they'll find."

Bower swallowed the lump in her throat.

The roar of the diesel engine sprung to life, breaking the moment. Bower climbed up in the cab of the truck trying not to cry. Kowalski got in the Hummer. It was only when Bower got seated she realized he'd not followed her. She could see him sitting in the rear of the Hummer with his back to her. It was nothing personal, she understood that, and yet it hurt just the same. Kowalski was probably as disgusted at himself as she was at herself for taking the easy way out. By separating from her, though, she couldn't help but feel condemned for abandoning the hospital. In reality, she told herself, his decision was probably unthinking and practical, as there wasn't a lot of room in the cab of the truck, but it hurt her nonetheless. For her, the tension between them felt unresolved.

As they pulled out of the courtyard, Bower saw Alile standing there, her arms limp by her side. A pang of guilt struck at Bower's heart. She wanted to wave to her, but she couldn't. There was no joy in this parting, none for either of them.

The hotel was less than four miles away but the journey took several hours. As they drove through the darkened streets, sporadic gunfire broke out, echoing off the buildings. In the distance, up on the hinterland, Bower could see flashes of light, explosions rocking the jungle road they'd traveled during the day.

The staff at the hotel were pleased to see them pull up, making a fuss of the soldiers, telling them they could stay for free. Jameson commented quietly to Bower that he hadn't even thought about money until they'd pulled up out front of the aging building, and he'd wondered if they'd take an IOU from the US Army.

From the hotel's perspective, having US soldiers on the premises provided a degree of security in a city slowly sliding toward anarchy. The hotel gave them five rooms at one end of the third floor. Jameson arranged for his soldiers to pull sentry duty and set Bower and Kowalski up in the middle room, with strict instructions to stay clear of the windows.

Bower had the first shower. In the sweltering heat of the early evening, a cool shower felt refreshing while the soap seemed to clean more than just the pores in her skin. After getting dressed, Bower stepped out of the bathroom, determined to talk further with Kowalski.

Kowalski was sitting on the bed. He handed her a can of Coca-Cola, saying, “It’s a little hot.”

“Isn’t everything in Malawi?” Bower asked, popping the ring on top of the can. “Mitch, about what happened back there. I—”

“I know what you’re going to say,” Kowalski said. “It’s a triage decision, isn’t it? You can’t save everyone, so you choose those you can save. And you choose them based on those with the best chance of surviving. You’ve got to be cold, you’ve got to be clinical, you’ve got to be realistic.”

Bower sat down on the edge of the bed beside him. Actually, she wasn’t going to say that at all. She wasn’t too sure what she was going to say, only that she was struggling to separate selfishness from self-preservation. She felt conflicted. For years, she and her right-leaning brother back in England had argued about the role of altruism. He’d taken the position that self-preservation trumped all other notions, that when it came down to it, people would do whatever they had to in order to save their own hides. She’d disagreed, saying she was giving her life in medical service to others less fortunate, but when the crunch came all her idealistic platitudes had proven worthless. Did that make her weak? Did that make her bad? Flawed? Or just human?

She was silent.

Kowalski breathed deeply. “It just sucks, you know?”

Bower nodded and sipped at the warm Coca-Cola. It tasted disgusting, but she was past caring. Kowalski was staring at her, but his mind was elsewhere. His voice was soft, considerate. A glazed look sat behind his thin-rimmed glasses.

“While I was an intern in Poland, so very many years ago, we had a football stadium collapse. High winds brought down part of the roof, trapping several of the spectators, but that wasn’t the worst of the incident. People panicked. They must have thought the whole place was going to cave-in. They ran for their lives. They pushed, they shoved, they fought to get out of the stadium. Eighty-four people died, crushed to death in the stampede.”

Bower swallowed.

“I was supposed to be working the graveyard shift in the emergency department but they called me in when the casualties started piling up in the ambulance bay. My mentor was an old German doctor by the name of Hans Grosen. I turned up and he gave me a whiteboard marker. He told me to start numbering the patients

outside, grading them from one to five based on the severity of their injuries, writing my medical opinion on their foreheads in the form of a single number. What he didn't tell me was why."

Kowalski took his glasses off, wiping a tear from his eye.

"I assumed he'd give the fives priority, but he only ever called for the threes and fours. The ones and twos survived with pain management administered by the paramedics.

"Not one of the fives survived beyond midnight, and he knew that would happen, the bastard. I hated him for that. God, how I hated him, and yet he was right. We treated almost two hundred people that night, and we only lost eleven souls. All but one of them carried a five on their forehead."

Kowalski breathed deeply, composing himself.

"To this day, I can't pick up a blue whiteboard marker without my hands shaking uncontrollably. I'm fine with black, green or red, but just looking at a blue marker brings me out in a cold sweat."

Bower found her lips were pursed, shut tight in anguish. She didn't know what to say. Kowalski had been thinking about this in far greater depth than she had.

"This whole fucking country is a five, Liz."

Bower nodded. Tears ran down her cheeks as he continued.

"There's nothing we can do, not a goddamn thing."

Kowalski rested his hand on her thigh, patting her gently as he stood up, saying, "Sometimes the right decision is the hardest decision of all. We came here to make a difference. We can no longer do that. As much as I hate to say it, it's time to leave."

Bower struggled to swallow the knot in her throat.

Kowalski started walking toward the bathroom.

"I'll sleep on the couch," he said in the same, deadpan tone of voice, switching subjects effortlessly as though it were entirely natural. He walked into the bathroom with his shoulders stooped, the weight of an entire country bearing down upon him.

Bower sat there for a few minutes, listening to the sound of running water falling like rain in the bathroom. She felt empty, but she had to move on. She understood that.

Kowalski was almost six feet tall, there was no way he'd fit on the couch, she figured. While he was in the shower, Bower took a pillow and a sheet from the cupboard and turned off the light. She curled up on the couch with the sheet draped over her.

Bower was still awake when Kowalski came out of the bathroom but she kept her eyes shut, pretending she was asleep. She wasn't, but she didn't know what else she could say to him. There were no words that could soothe the grief they were both feeling.

Lying there in the dark, Bower felt the seconds pass as though

they were hours. She had no idea how long she lay there awake but after an age she heard Kowalski softly snoring. Ordinarily, this would have kept her awake even longer, but on that night his gentle rasp brought relief. As with all things, time marched on and her body demanded its rest even if her mind rebelled.

In the morning, Bower woke to the sound of the soldiers playing in the courtyard below. They were boisterous, yelling at each other, throwing a football around. It was late when she arose. This was becoming a habit, she thought to herself, but she knew it was a physical reaction to the stress she was feeling, wearing her out. Five, she thought, remembering the conversation from the night before. Was Kowalski right? She didn't want to know. Her head said yes, her heart refused to reply either way. For now, she had to put that behind her.

Why did they let her sleep so late, she wondered? Didn't Jameson want to push on to Lilongwe? And she remembered the discussion with the Red Cross. Jameson was probably trying to find out what was happening in Lilongwe so they didn't go from the frying pan into the fire.

After going to the bathroom and freshening up, Bower dressed and headed downstairs. She found Jameson and Kowalski sitting in a decrepit restaurant by the pool. The water in the pool was green, but that didn't seem to worry the soldiers who were hell-bent on emptying the pool with the biggest possible splashes they could muster. They ran and jumped into the murky water, sending tidal waves crashing over the edge of the pool and out across the cobblestones. The courtyard must have been quite nice once, but missing tiles and cracked walls betrayed neglect.

Jameson and Kowalski were talking with another man, someone Bower didn't recognize.

"James Leopold," the middle-aged man said, standing to greet Bower as she walked over. "Reporter for Rolling Stone and African correspondent for CNN."

Leopold's pale complexion looked out of place in Africa. His hair was neatly cropped. As a young man he wouldn't have been out of place in a Sears catalog, he had that natural, handsome look and engaging smile that seemed to guarantee a sale. Bower figured he was in his mid to late fifties, perhaps his early sixties, and he still looked good. He was trim and fit. A light dusting of gray sat on either side of the dark hair on his head, making him look distinguished rather than old.

"Elizabeth Bower, I'm a doctor with Médecins Sans Frontières."

"The pleasure is mine," he replied, shaking her hand gently.

And he had a smooth tongue to match, thought Bower.

“Do you want some breakfast?” Kowalski asked. “They’ve got eggs. They’re not very good, but a bit of protein doused in fat never hurt anyone, right?”

“Sure,” Bower replied, a little confused by Kowalski and his surprisingly upbeat mood. Last night had been a watershed moment for her, but he appeared to have switched off after what had seemed like a conversation reserved for a confessional booth. Two Hail Mary’s and three repetitions of the Lord’s Prayer, would that really wash away the past? Somehow, he’d shut down those seething emotions, or perhaps that was the impression he wanted to give. Either way, she could understand that. Being doctors, they both knew introversion was professional suicide, leaving only an empty shell. There came a point where you had to bury the past and move on. For her, though, one night seemed too quick. She doubted he was over what had happened yesterday at the hospital. She knew she wasn’t.

Bower sat down as Kowalski got up and walked behind the bar, disappearing into the kitchen. Jameson must have picked up on the look of surprise on her face.

“The help here is a bit inconsistent. If you want something, you’ve got to go get it yourself. Your buddy, Kowalski, isn’t a bad chef.”

Bower smiled, pouring herself a glass of water.

“Like kids, aren’t they,” she said, gesturing toward the soldiers by the pool. Elvis was lying on a deck chair with his shirt off, sunning himself, while Smithy was being chased by several of the other soldiers. They crash tackled her, flying into her and dragging her into the pool. She didn’t seem to mind a bit of wrestling.

Bosco was the only one doing any work. He was sitting beneath the shade of a poolside umbrella, working on the radio. Beside him, another soldier lay asleep in the shade.

“Shouldn’t they be soldiering, or whatever else it is you normally do?” Bower asked. She wasn’t being mean, she was curious. Jameson must have sensed her question was genuine and not a criticism.

“Yeah. Seems a little out of place, but that’s army life for you. These guys have not only been trained to fight. They’ve been trained to exploit. In the army, you never know what’s coming next. So if you don’t have to stand, you sit. If you don’t have to sit, you lie down. If you don’t have to be awake, you sleep. Either way, you exploit whatever opportunities you have, as you never know what the next 48 hours will demand of you. So it’s good for them to let their hair down, have a little R&R, although I need Bosco to get that radio fixed. We need to find out what’s happening in Lilongwe.”

Bower nodded.

“So, Dr. Bower,” Leopold said, pulling out a small worn pad and pen.

“Liz, please,” Bower replied, wanting Leopold to address her informally. She felt a little uncomfortable with his tone, not sure how she’d walked into an impromptu interview.

“Liz, what do you make of all this?”

Leopold had already started jotting notes, but she wasn’t sure why. How could he write something before she had even replied? Besides, Bower doubted she could tell him anything of any significance.

“Me? I think it is grossly irresponsible for the international community to pull out of Malawi. I don’t see how an alien spaceship changes anything on the ground here in Africa. There are plenty of people in NASA and ESA to deal with that, and I think the biggest danger we face is not from some alien visitors as from our own paranoid reactions.”

Leopold never lifted his eyes from his pad. Didn’t they use digital recorders these days, she wondered, although pen and paper would probably never go out of vogue, especially when electrical power was in short supply.

“And the imposition of martial law?” Leopold asked.

“We’re in the middle of a civil war. There’s no room for civil liberties at a time like this.”

“Oh, I wasn’t talking about Malawi, I was talking about the US and Europe.”

Bower felt her blood run cold.

“What?” she exclaimed.

“How much do you know?” Leopold asked, looking up from his pad for a second.

Jameson added, “Nothing.” And Bower could see he was as taken back as she was by the concept. In that moment, the noises around her faded into the background, the soldiers playing in the pool, the government helicopter flying overhead, the sporadic gunfire she’d grown accustomed to in the distance, they all slipped into silence as she focused on Leopold’s words.

“The United States has gone into meltdown, with President Addison under house arrest and the National Guard on the streets. Commerce has ground to a halt. Supermarket shelves have been stripped bare. Gas stations are running dry. Congress issued anti-hoarding laws and has ordered public servants to continue working through the crisis, but the vast majority of those in non-critical roles have stayed away from the office. The media hasn’t helped. They’ve whipped the country into a frenzy, with reports of alien craft touching down across the United States.”

“They’ve landed?” Bower asked.

“No one knows for sure. There’s so much confusion. Several

videos of aliens attacking a farmhouse in Iowa have gone viral, but they were later debunked as fakes. Regardless, though, the panic they generated was real. Now, no one knows what to believe.

"Some aspects of society are still functioning, but not many. Schools are closed. The police are overwhelmed. Hospitals are running low on supplies. It ain't pretty. You think it's bad here? At least here we know who the enemy is. Over there, there's mass hysteria."

As he spoke, Jameson turned his head. Bower followed his gaze. A dark trail cut through the air above the city, striking a government helicopter and sending it spiraling to the ground. The chopper was barely a gnat in the distance, and yet plumes of black smoke billowed from its fuselage as it twisted and corkscrewed through the air, plunging to the city below.

"Yeah, well," Jameson said. "I doubt they're firing RPGs at each other."

Kowalski walked over, placing a plate of scrambled eggs in front of Bower along with a knife and fork.

"Did you want some orange juice?" Kowalski asked, gesturing toward a glass pitcher sitting on a table in the courtyard. The drink had been set out for the soldiers. Plastic cups lay scattered on the table and across the ground. The football must have struck early on, barely missing the pitcher, knocking the cups across the tiles. The ruddy contents within the glass jug looked more like Kool Aid than juice. Ice floated on top of the drink. Bower looked at Kowalski somewhat surprised he could be so detached and nonchalant. For her, it was as though he were the construct of some surreal dream. She took a fraction of a second to reply.

"Ah, no. Thank you."

Her head was spinning. She took a bite of the eggs. They were slightly salty, and the burst of flavor brought her back to the moment. It was only then she realized how hungry she was.

"The Russians, Chinese and Germans are all on a war footing," Leopold said. "They're mobilizing their armies, but against who?"

Bower felt as though she was supposed to provide some profound insight into his comment, but she was out of her depth. What difference would her opinion make? She averted her eyes, looking down at the plate as she ate. Leopold seemed to sense that and shifted the subject back to Malawi.

"What brought you into a war zone?"

Bower was barely aware of Kowalski on the periphery of her vision. He'd wandered out into the courtyard by the pitcher of orange juice. He stood there for a few minutes, staring up at the sky.

What brought her into a war zone? That wasn't an easy question to answer. For her, life was more than an episode of Jeopardy where

answering half-a-dozen questions could solve everything. She was in no mood for the patronizing interest of a journalist killing time. She wasn't quite sure how to describe her mood, whether it was a blend of disappointment with herself, anger at the United Nations or frustration over the warring factions in Malawi, but playing twenty-questions wasn't high in her priorities.

"Look at me," she said, taking Leopold off-guard, forcing him to look up from his notepad. "Don't just listen to my voice. Don't be deceived by the sense of civility and culture in my accent, the air of regal British speech in my eloquent pronunciation. Look at me for who I am. Look at the color of my skin, the texture of my hair."

Bower put her knife and fork down and held out her arms. She was wearing a short-sleeve blouse with the top two buttons undone. Her dark African skin was a stark contrast to the soft, white cotton. Although she'd washed her face, with the heat of the day already upon them she was sure she was perspiring, and she knew that gave her dark skin an oily sheen.

"We are all from Africa, Mr Leopold, it is just a question of when our ancestors left this accursed continent. As for me, it was at some point in the late 1800s, while for you it was thirty to forty thousand years ago.

"What is it that defines a man or a woman? We'd like to think we've finally moved beyond the color of one's skin, but now it seems it's the shitty patch of dirt above which they were born. And yet we are no different. Our differences arise only in how and where we were raised. But what a difference that is. For you, coming from the First World, your life expectancy is somewhere in the high eighties. These people around us, though, they'll be lucky if they make forty. And why? It's not just the civil war, it's everything we do to each other, it's the superstitions, the prejudices, the insatiable lust for power, the weakness that leads to corruption.

"A bunch of little green men appear on the scene, and we'll show them what we want them to see. We'll show them our universities, our operatic concerts, our art and culture, but I hope they see this. I hope they see dusty Malawi. I hope they see the orphans. I hope they see the widows, for then they'll see us for the contradiction that is humanity."

Bower looked deep into Leopold's eyes.

"The question shouldn't be what brought me to a war zone, it should be why the hell are there still war zones? Why the hell do we treat each other with such disdain? When will we grow up? Perhaps ET will have a few pointers for us, if we don't shoot him out of the sky first."

Leopold had stopped writing. He was looking past her, out of the

courtyard and up at the sky. Bower was incensed. He was ignoring her.

Kowalski sat down next to her with two glasses of orange juice, putting one in front of her even though she'd said she didn't want another drink. She looked at him. His eyes were blank, and she realized he was struggling with everything that was happening. The world was changing so fast. Like Leopold, Kowalski had to be filtering what he'd heard her say, substituting what he wanted to hear. Bower sipped at the juice without saying a word, but clearly the pressure was getting to them all. Rather than orange juice, her drink tasted like watered-down Tang.

Jameson got up with a start, the steel legs of his chair scraping on the tiles. He walked out into the courtyard by the pool. It was only then Bower realized the yelling and playing of the soldiers had ceased a few minutes beforehand. She turned and looked at the soldiers. They were standing still, looking up into the sky in silence. To her surprise, the gunfire that sporadically erupted throughout the city had faded.

Something was wrong.

Bower walked out behind Jameson.

There, in the cloudless blue sky, sat the alien spacecraft hundreds of miles above Earth's atmosphere. Although Bower wasn't sure quite what she had expected, the sight before her was like nothing she could have ever dreamed of. At first glance, she assumed she was looking at the moon, with its soft bluish white surface visible in the daylight, its dark side hidden by the bright sky, but this was no thin crescent, no silver arc reflecting back the sunlight from the depths of space, this was a living organism.

Tentacles rippled around the edge of the alien craft, fine cilia waving with the light. The alien spaceship reminded her more of a single-celled bacterium than a machine that traversed the stars. Fascinated, she stood there in awe with the soldiers. Like a waxing moon, part of the craft was hidden in shadow, but those surfaces that caught the sunlight showed up in astonishing detail, revealing the craft's elongated shape.

The craft pulsated, its cilia moving in waves like the wind rippling across a field of wheat. Shapes formed like fingerprints and then faded away. The very structure of the craft seemed to change, as though it were not a fixed shape. The alien vessel appeared to ooze through space.

"Mother fucker…"

Bower wasn't sure who had spoken. Normally, she wasn't one for profanity, but under the circumstances she was inclined to agree. Of one thing she was sure, humanity had no idea what it was dealing with. There were no parallels. There was no point of comparison,

nothing to draw upon. Whatever these aliens were, whatever they represented, however they thought, whatever their motives, Bower was sure there was no earthly equivalent.

"How?" She began. She'd intended to ask an intelligent question, but just that one word came out. Her mind was awash with doubt.

Leopold stood beside her.

"I take it you guys haven't seen the freak show before?"

Bower turned to him wondering what stunned look sat on her face. Although it seemed like a cliche, she was aware her jaw had dropped and her mouth was open.

"Yeah," Leopold continued. "It kinda has that effect on everyone the first time."

"What do you know about it?" Jameson asked, stepping backwards next to them. His eyes never left the craft as it rose slowly above the uneasy quiet of the city. Bower could see his professionalism kicking in.

Leopold spoke with the precision of a reporter providing a sound bite.

"The mothership is the size of Connecticut. NASA has said there's no cause for panic, but you try telling that to a bunch of rednecks crowing about anal probes, or a bunch of Arabs that won't let women drive, or a Buddhist monk or the Pope, a Pacific island chief or a corrupt politician from Russia. Don't panic, my ass. Hysteria has seized the world. You think Malawi is all fucked up. You should see Yonkers."

In any other context, Jameson probably would have laughed, but it was apparent Leopold wasn't joking.

"They're saying it's the end of the world, but that's not the worst bit."

Bower didn't say anything, she couldn't think of anything worse.

"The worst part of all this is those nutters that are trying to bring about the end of the world. For them, this is somehow a biblical prophesy coming true, something about a dragon with seven heads."

Jameson turned to Leopold. There was no grandstanding on Leopold's part, these were raw facts.

"NASA released images of the craft a few days ago, just before the UFO moved in from somewhere near the Moon. The press ran with the scientific opinion that their presence was benign, but it didn't seem to matter, all it took was a few fringe groups to run with worst-case scenarios about the aliens being monsters from hell and fear ran rampant through society. The general population freaked out at the thought of a strange alien spaceship flying overhead with impunity. It's Sputnik all over again.

"And it's not just that the alien spacecraft looks scary, it's that the

appearance of this grotesque craft has shattered the illusion of control we have in life. We like to think we're masters of our own destiny, but that thing has proven otherwise, showing just how impotent and insignificant we really are in this vast universe."

Leopold stuttered, which seemed out of character for him, making Bower wonder how deeply all this affected him personally.

"At first… At first, it was just the wackos, you know, the cults. The isolationists, shacked up in some barn in the middle of farmland, waiting for the Messiah or some shit. Men, women, children… Jonestown all over again. But then they started finding normal folk, people that just snapped. Murder-suicides. Poor bastards never reached out to someone. They should have. They should have said something. They should have talked to someone about what they were feeling. They shouldn't have felt helpless. They shouldn't have felt alone. There were people all around them who cared, they just couldn't see it."

Tears were rolling down his cheeks. Bower went to say something, but Leopold cut her off.

"Life should never end that way. Life is too precious. No matter how dark the night, the world keeps turning, there's always a dawn. Even if someone's on the other side of the world, they're never more than a phone call away, you know."

Jameson's head hung low. Bower felt a lump in her throat.

"I… I should have been there. Not half a world away, drinking myself silly in some shitty bar in a country on the verge of war. But, no, I had to be someone. I had to prove something. I was driven, driven by what? Driven to what? To be the big man, the foreign correspondent for a throw-away thirty second slot in the late edition of the News?"

He paused for a second, and Bower wondered who he'd lost. She couldn't be sure, but she suspected it had been his parents.

"Funny thing, this alien spaceship. Makes you see life in a different light. It's as though someone's lifted the rose-colored glasses and I'm finally seeing reality for what it is."

He wiped his eyes.

"It's not their fault," Leopold continued. "The aliens, that is. Hell, they haven't done anything other than to show up at the party. It's us. Self-obsessed. For tens of thousands of years we thought the cosmos revolved around us, the sun and all the stars rising and setting on our egos. Oh, Copernicus might have shifted the bounds, putting the sun at the center of the solar system, but we still think everything revolves around us."

He paused for a second, as though he was waiting for her to correct him, but Bower didn't know quite what to say.

“Look at how stupid we are. They come in peace. We go to pieces. They must think the whole bloody planet is an insane asylum.”

“But,” Bower pleaded, “there must be someone down here who has kept their head about them.”

“Oh, there’s a bunch of scientists banding together to represent humanity, only they don’t. They’re the minority, the level heads. Even they are victims of this madness.”

“I don’t understand,” Jameson said.

“Fear spreads like wildfire. We’re like a herd of buffalo spooked by lightning. The thunder breaks and we charge headlong off the cliff, blindly following whoever’s in front of us. Stampedes trample the weak, they bring out the worst in humanity. There’s only so much rational thought when the supermarket shelves are bare. There’s only so much restraint when the gas pump runs empty. There’s only so long we can hold out against our base survival instincts, then we’re just animals fighting to survive. It’s trample or be trampled.”

Leopold put his hands on his head, pulling at his hair in frustration as he turned to one side, making as though he was going to scream.

Jameson took charge. He seemed to understand what was needed. He barked orders at his soldiers, his gruff voice snapping Leopold back to reality.

“Elvis, take Smithy, Brannigan and Phelps, and see what sense you can get out of any refugees coming up from Lilongwe. We need to know if the UN still holds the airport.

“Bosco, I need that goddamn radio fixed. We need to get in touch with the Navy, get them to send in a couple of helos for evac.”

Elvis strutted over, his chest bare, sweat dripping from his muscular frame.

“They ain’t gonna send shit with RPGs lighting up the sky,” he added with his Memphis swagger. He picked up his backpack and his M4 rifle, handling them as though they were weightless.

Jameson considered his words, replying, “Then we get clear of Ksaungu. If we can, we make for Lilongwe and grab the last stagecoach out of Dodge. If we can’t make Lilongwe, we find ourselves some clear ground and call in the cavalry.”

“And if the radio doesn’t work?” Bosco asked.

“Same as usual. We hump over the mountains,” Jameson said.

“Fucking-A,” Elvis replied. He seemed to relish the prospect of marching for hundreds of miles through the jungle. He was already heading out through the restaurant, three other soldiers following hard behind him.

Bower appreciated Jameson’s resolve. He was breaking them out of a slump, not letting his men lose focus.

“You can join us,” Jameson said, reaching out a hand to Leopold. For a second, the older man hesitated, then he reached out and shook the soldier’s hand.

“I appreciate the gesture, but I’m here for the duration.”

Jameson nodded respectfully.

Leopold looked back at the alien craft. Whatever its path, it wasn’t passing directly overhead, its orbit took it from the south-east to the north-west but its passage was further to the west, somewhere out over Zambia.

“I’ll be all right,” Leopold added, looking at Bower, speaking as though she needed to hear reassuring words. Kowalski walked up grinning as though he were on holiday. Between him and Leopold, Bower knew exactly what was happening.

Leopold seemed to be able to switch off his concerns. It was a facade, she’d seen him coming apart at the seams just moments before, but now he was calm and collected. Like all of them, he’d been in Africa too long. He’d learnt to disconnect himself from reality and deal with the harsh cruelty of war, but that meant suspending the normal feelings of empathy one human being felt for another. It wasn’t calloused, she had to do the same thing whenever she operated, to do any less was to jeopardize someone’s life during surgery. But Leopold had extended this front to dealing with the alien. He buried the raw feelings about his family that just moments before had threatened to boil over.

As savage as a war zone was, it was a known quantity. The prospect of a world torn apart on contact with a vastly superior alien species represented too many unknowns. Unknowns unsettled even the bravest souls. As much as Bower wanted to think of herself as coldly logical, she knew there was a bias at play, skewing her perception as much as his. And Kowalski was too calm, making out as though there was nothing exceptional in the sky at all. Jameson might not show it, but he too must have felt the fractured tension.

At that point in time, Bower could have said, ‘I saw a unicorn dancing in a rainbow this morning,’ and no one would have batted an eyelid. It was shock, not the shock of physical trauma, the shock of sensory overload. Bower had seen this once before, during her first parachute jump.

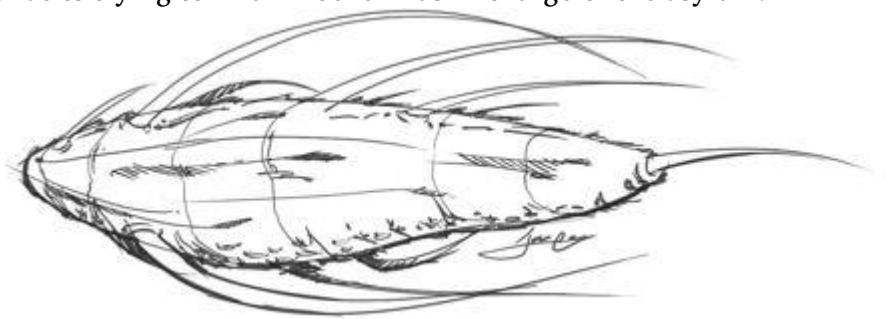
Standing there in the sweltering heat of the courtyard, her mind flashed back to that tandem jump from ten thousand feet. The air had been surprisingly cold when the door to the small Cessna opened. With stainless steel carabiners locking her jumpsuit to the instructor behind her, the two of them had shuffled awkwardly toward the open door. He told her it would be just like their rehearsal sitting on the tarmac. All she had to do was swing her feet around, out of the open

door, and rest them on the wheel, but her mind shut down. She could hear people talking to her, reassuring her she'd be fine, but her body felt numb.

Bower remembered nodding. Those few seconds felt like a dream. The instructor positioned himself behind her, his legs straddling her back. She could remember the countdown from three, which seemed a ridiculously small number to start from. Why not five? Or ten? But she'd known it was a token gesture, something to provide a semblance of sanity when jumping out of a perfectly functional aircraft, and then it came, the sensory overload. The instructor pushed forward, tumbling headlong out of the plane with her hanging from his straps.

Apparently, they had 30 seconds of free-fall before the chute opened, but Bower's mind had overloaded. There was too much coming at her. All she remembered was sitting on the edge of the plane and then the chute opening above her. At the time, she had marveled at how far away the plane was when the parachute opened, her mind jarred by its apparently instantaneous motion. It was only when she reviewed the video from her helmet cam that she realized she'd blacked out. She'd never lost consciousness, her mind had simply refused to process the events that appeared to lead only to her demise. It wasn't until the chute opened that her subconscious returned control to her.

And here she was, looking in the eyes of a perfectly rational reporter in a war zone, a veteran of too many conflicts, struggling with the implications of a vast alien spacecraft looming overhead. Leopold smiled, as did Kowalski. Bower smiled too. They were three lunatics trying to find whoever was in charge of the asylum.



# Chapter 06: Road to Lilongwe

The next morning, Bower was woken by a sharp rap on the door and a soldier's voice yelling, "Get your shit packed. We roll in fifteen." At least, she thought that's what was said.

For a moment, she had to check whether she was dreaming. It was still dark out, but the sky was lightening. Kowalski was already downstairs, she figured, as his bag was gone and he was nowhere to be seen. Fifteen minutes, Bower felt like screaming at the top of her lungs. What sort of world is it where people expect you to get ready for the day in a mere fifteen minutes?

"Barbarians," she muttered to herself as she wandered into the bathroom and splashed water on her face. If she was going to be ready to go in fifteen minutes she'd have to hustle. By her somewhat admittedly anecdotal reckoning of time she was downstairs within fifteen minutes with her bag over her shoulder, but she was the only one standing there by the Hummer and the truck.

Bower felt cheated.

She could see one of the soldiers on sentry duty on the second floor, watching the vehicles and the back entrance to the hotel, but this was hardly the quick, early start she'd expected.

Jameson came jogging casually down the stairs.

"Good morning," he said cheerfully.

"Morning," she replied. Bower couldn't bring herself to add the adjective good, not yet at least. Ah, she was being too grumpy and she knew it.

"There's coffee in the kitchen."

"I'm good."

There, she said it, good was out there for all to hear. Well, Jameson at least.

"We should be ready to go within—"

"Fifteen," she added, cutting him off.

He smiled. She could see he was a little confused by her abrupt comment. Bower softened her attitude, saying, "Yeah, I thought we'd be ready in around fifteen minutes."

If she could figure out who had thumped on her door, she was going to throttle them.

Jameson seemed a little perplexed by her attitude, but he clearly wasn't in on the joke. He just nodded as he put his pack in the Hummer.

"Wouldn't it make sense to just take the truck?" Bower asked out of curiosity, watching as Jameson rummaged around in the back of the Hummer. "It's big enough for all of us. Won't our fuel go further

that way?"

"That old piece of shit?" Jameson replied. As the words left his lips he seemed to soften, apparently not wanting to offend her. "Nah. Two is one, one is none."

"Sorry? I didn't catch that."

"Oh, it's an army phrase," Jameson said, grabbing another pack from the rear steps of the hotel. "If you've only got one set of wheels and something breaks, you're screwed, if you've got two, you can pack everyone into the one remaining vehicle if one of them breaks down. Two is one, one is none. It means, ensure you have redundancy."

"Oh," Bower replied, nodding at the realization.

"And besides," he added. "We're a small force. Two vehicles make us appear bigger, a force to be reckoned with. A bit of bluster goes a long way."

The sun was low, barely creeping over the horizon, casting long shadows down the dusty city streets. Above them, the alien craft soared through space. The mothership orbited Earth once every two hours, appearing overhead for roughly thirty minutes as it gracefully soared through the sky. During the night, the craft shimmered like a chameleon, changing colors. Like oil in a puddle, there was a greasy, rainbow of colors, almost metallic in their appearance. The fine tentacles waved as though caught in a breeze. Bower wondered about how big they were, knowing their size was deceptive given the distance involved, but they looked as fine as the hair on her arm.

The previous night, they'd sat up talking until the early hours of the morning, watching for each passing of the alien spacecraft like kids waiting for Santa, at least that's the way she felt. Across the city, a cry would resound as the inhabitants recognized the unearthly shape drifting smoothly above them. At first, Bower thought it was a cheer, but as the night went on she realized it was a wail, like that of mourners at a funeral.

In the early morning light, the craft took on the purples and pinks of the dawn. For her, the sight was hypnotic.

"Do you mind if I ask you a question?"

"Sure," Jameson replied.

"I don't mean to doubt you, or anything like that, and I do appreciate your… " She was struggling for the word, "expertise in things military, if that's the right way to phrase it. But, why did we wait here so long? Why stay two nights in Ksaungu instead of pushing on to Lilongwe. I mean, I know it wasn't because you're afraid or anything like that. I don't think that at all. It's just, I thought there was a plane waiting for us there or something… " She was tripping over her words. What started out as a good question had slowly degraded into blather.

Jameson smiled. He really was a gentleman at heart and seemed to understand what she was getting at far better than she did herself.

"Combat isn't about shooting guns madly at bad guys, it's about planning and preparation. Rule number one: Never walk blindly into a new arena."

Bower sat on the dusty steps of a fire exit as he spoke. She finally recognized Smithy on the second floor balcony, peering out across the city with her machine gun at the ready, having kept watch through at least part of the night. Bower wasn't sure how often the sentries rotated, but she knew Jameson had two of his team awake at all times.

"Combat is fluid, never static, always changing. Lilongwe is an unknown. While there was the chance of rest here in Ksaungu and no good intel on Lilongwe it was prudent to sit tight."

Bower nodded thoughtfully.

"Besides, we needed to get that radio fixed. Now Bosco's got the shortwave circuits working on the radio we'll be able to contact any troops still in Ksaungu. Shortwave won't give us over-the-horizon coms, but we will have line-of-sight. The standard operating procedure when someone's MIA is for a high-altitude fly over, listening for MAD chatter."

"Mad Hatter?" Bower replied, surprised by the term. "What? Like Alice in Wonderland?"

"No," Jameson added, laughing. "Chatter, MAD chatter. MAD is an acronym meaning Military Air Distress. They'll be listening for us on the MAD frequency."

"Oh," said Bower, feeling a little stupid. "And how far is line-of-sight?"

"About fifty to a hundred clicks, depending on our terrain and their altitude."

Bower didn't ask what a click was, but she figured fifty to a hundred of them was neither close nor that far away.

"From what we've heard, the road to Lilongwe is littered with burnt out army vehicles. The rebels fought hard to break the supply lines between the two cities, but the army's kept the roads open. I mean to squeeze through before the rebels regroup and try their hand again."

Bower breathed deeply. Jameson made the plan sound routine.

Kowalski walked out with Leopold.

Jameson said, "We roll in—"

"Fifteen," Bower added, again cutting him off. She grinned at Jameson, showing her teeth in a half smile. He looked a little confused and must have realized she had her own private joke going on.

"Actually," he replied, "since everyone's up I was going to say,

five."

Jameson disappeared inside the rear entrance to the hotel.

Bower screwed her face up.

"They're not going to like that," Leopold said, talking to Kowalski more than Bower. "I think the staff here quite liked having the Rangers around. It was like they had their own personal security service, mercenaries that didn't drink or shoot up the bar. This whole section of town has been quiet since you guys arrived. I don't think anyone wanted to upset the Americans, hoping they'd stay. No one wants to be abandoned, and seeing US soldiers on the ground has given the Africans some hope, false hope for sure, but hope nonetheless."

The two men sat next to Bower.

"Have you changed your mind?" Bower asked, turning to Leopold.

"Nope. Have you? Better the devil you know, and all that. Besides, there's an NBC film crew due in here at the end of the week. I'll hook up with them."

"Keep your head down," Bower replied.

"You too."

Kowalski sipped coffee from a styrofoam cup.

"Hey, why didn't you wake me?" Bower asked.

"I thought you'd prefer a little more sleep," Kowalski replied. Bower knew he meant well, but she'd have rather he didn't try so hard. Kowalski was always trying too hard to be considerate. As long as she'd known him, he'd always been like that, always prepared to put himself out for others. For once, she wished he'd be selfish, and not just so she didn't feel so bad. He needed to be selfish for himself, so he didn't burn out.

"Well, I don't know about you, but I slept like a log," she replied, having had her best night's sleep in weeks. It might have been short, but it was deep.

Leopold was watching the alien craft drifting effortlessly toward the horizon.

"Gives me chills," he said to no one in particular.

Bower understood why Leopold found the alien presence unnerving, but for her, once the fear passed, the mystique of an apparently living interstellar spacecraft awakened a sense of awe within her. She saw an object of beauty, moving with grace as it glided through the heavens.

Kowalski must have seen her staring into the sky. "Well," he said. "Seems they're happy to circle around up there, and that's fine by me."

"I wonder what they're thinking about, what they're planning,"

Bower said, thinking aloud.

"Crop circles and anal probes, no doubt," Kowalski joked.

"I'm in no hurry to find out," Leopold added.

"Don't you think it's beautiful?" Bower asked, again musing out loud, trying to articulate what she was feeling.

"Maybe," Kowalski offered in an answer that was little more than a polite way of disagreeing. "In the same way a rattlesnake or a shark can be considered beautiful."

"I'm serious," she replied, surprised by the emphasis in her tone of voice. "I mean, think about it, just because something is different doesn't mean it can't be beautiful. And not just in the way a butterfly is pretty, with colorful patterns painted on its wings. Beautiful as in delightful, functional, like a bee or an octopus. Even the most boring of birds, with dull brown feathers, has a natural beauty about it, and I can't help but feel the same way about this. There's a natural beauty to the alien spacecraft. I mean, it's not a pile of nuts and bolts like our spaceships. And it's not streamlined or aerodynamic, with sleek curves and sharp points. It's not from this world and yet it has an earthy feel to it, as though it were something that could grace the cover of National Geographic."

Neither man said anything. Bower continued her train of thought.

"I guess we see what we want to see, right? Beauty's in the eye of the beholder… The more I think about how they've traversed a gazillion miles through empty space, looking for our tiny mote of dust awash in this vast universe, the less I'm afraid. They came to us. They sought us out. They want to know about us. Isn't that flattering? Here we are, looking up at them in awe, wondering who they are and what makes them tick, and they're looking down upon us thinking the same thing. That's kinda cool, and certainly nothing to be afraid of."

The alien craft slipped over the horizon, disappearing from sight behind the distant buildings.

"Yeah, I guess," Kowalski offered.

Her words must have stirred the journalist within Leopold. As he spoke, Bower got the distinct impression he was making mental notes for an upcoming article.

"My father used to tell me that fear is our default response to the unknown. It's a survival mechanism, an instinctive reaction over a reasoned response. Our history is checkered with xenophobia, the fear of something different, different people from different countries, different cultures. We're tribal. We like people to be the same as us."

Leopold was divorcing himself, straightening his thinking. For Bower, it was interesting to see him reasoning through what she instinctively felt. That he was able to suspend his own fears and assume her hopes surprised her, but perhaps that's what reporters did

best; place themselves in another person's shoes.

"And we've conditioned ourselves to respond like this. Really, it's no surprise we're overreacting and panicking about an alien invasion. When was the last time Hollywood showed someone turning up on our doorstep with anything other than death rays? Blood and guts with a splash of acid gets asses on seats. Hell, we can't accept foreigners from Colombia or Sudan without an air of suspicion, wondering if they're terrorists or drug runners. What hope does someone from another planet have? Someone wears a turban in a mall and Al Qaeda's attacking."

Kowalski laughed.

"Think of what we'll learn," Bower said, quietly wishing the star ship would land. She wanted to say more, but words failed her. It had taken some time to acclimatize to the concept, but she was genuinely excited about the future. The prospect of getting out of a country sliding deeper into civil war was the furthest thing from her mind. She just assumed that would happen. It was a trivial detail, something that paled in comparison to First Contact. Mortality itself seemed suspended by the alien spacecraft with its iridescent glow at night and its rippling surface in the bright daylight. Life trumped death, at least in that moment. Life coming from another star caused the pain and suffering and misery she saw in Africa to fade like the night giving way to dawn.

"This," Kowalski began, having lost his initial skepticism, "this really could be a new beginning for the human race." His acceptance of her position, and his readiness to move away from pessimism filled her with hope. Deep down, Bower knew it was unfounded and irrational, but she held to hope regardless. With hope and fear as equal possibilities, why not choose the positive? With hope, she could pretend Africa would one day be at peace. With hope, she could forget about the hundreds that would die that day in the swollen heat, victims of a futile war.

Jameson came jogging down the stairs with Elvis, Bosco and Smithy behind him.

Elvis paused on the last step. Stretching his arms out wide, he cried out, "Elvis has left the building," and stepped down onto the road like royalty.

"You're such an idiot," Bosco said, slapping him on the shoulder.

The other soldiers appeared from down the long, open corridor and climbed into the Hummer, throwing the last of their packs in the truck.

Jameson glanced at Bower. Something in his eyes snapped Bower back to reality; he seemed to sense her glassy-eyed enthusiasm. She didn't dare offer her thoughts to him.

Elvis was chewing gum as he called out to Jameson and Bower, saying, “Y’all still want me to come witcha?”

“You pulled the short straw,” Jameson replied. “You’re babysitting yet again.”

Elvis spat his gum out on the ground and climbed into the driver’s side of the truck.

Leopold stood there warmly waving goodbye as Bosco drove the Hummer out of the dusty courtyard, followed by the truck. Kowalski was in the Hummer with the rest of the Rangers, while Jameson and Bower sat in the cab of the truck with Elvis. Smithy stood in the turret of the Hummer with the lightweight SAW machine gun mounted on rails, daring a challenge. With her helmet, dark shades, bullet-proof vest and camouflage clothing she looked every bit a soldier. Bower had no doubt about her resolve.

The main street was already crowded, with Africans wanting to conduct their trade before the heat of the day made the city unbearable. The stench of raw sewage wafted through the air. As the two-vehicle convoy wound its way through the streets there was a sense of surprise at seeing Americans driving around the city. Some of the Africans waved, most just stared. Whether that was out of exasperation or indifference, Bower wasn’t sure.

Artillery shells rained down on the western suburbs. Clouds of dark smoke rose in thin columns in the still air. From what Bower could tell, they weren’t in any immediate danger as they were heading south and the barrage was barely audible over the sound of the rattly diesel engine, but the faces she passed had a sense of helplessness to them. What she’d thought was exasperation or indifference was neither, these people were resigned to being abandoned. In her mind, she found herself struggling with the identity of the people they passed. A woman not much older than Bower, with a young child in hand, stared at her with wide eyes longing for pity. Bower felt as though the woman could see right through her.

There were boys playing in the street, kicking a can around between them, oblivious to the murderous thunder creeping over the city. Old men sat in the doorways chewing opiates, spitting on the concrete. Young girls hung washing out of the windows, draping wet clothing over rusting poles and wires stretched out between the buildings. What did they make of a visitor from another world? They must have seen the mothership orbiting Earth. They must have known change was coming, but for them change had only ever meant renewed oppression.

What did the Africans think of First Contact? From what Bower could see, they were more interested in keeping their heads down and surviving another day. What difference would there be for them?

None, really. If anything, life would continue to get worse not better. Without UN troops on the ground it was survival of the cruelest.

Jameson was quiet. Bower wondered what he was thinking. She would have felt better if he were talking, but he was focused on the road ahead, occasionally talking on the radio with Bosco in the lead vehicle.

Bower couldn't look. She kept her eyes forward, watching the road, trying to avoid eye contact with anyone on the roadside. Donkeys, horse-drawn carts and rusted old cars meandered down the road, slowing the convoy's progress. Bower found her eyes drawn to a makeshift flatbed truck coming down the road toward them. With no hood, the fan cooling the radiator whirled around dangerously, as did the fan belt. Black smoke seeped out from around the engine. As the truck passed, Bower could hear the rhythmic thumping of the engine, seemingly cobbled together with fencing wire. At any point, that truck could have shaken itself apart.

As they wound their way out of the city and into the thick jungle hills rising above Ksaungu, the contrast of deep greens became a welcome break from the dusty, muddy browns. The temperature dropped as they climbed higher. A cool breeze blew from the east.

Within a few miles, the concrete road gave way to rough stones and pebbles lining the track. Landslides narrowed the road at points, slowing them to a crawl as they merged with other vehicles making the treacherous journey through the mountains. Government soldiers trudged through the mud on the side of the track, their boots caked in dirt. With their rifles slung over their shoulders and their heads hung low they looked like an army in retreat.

Once they were clear of the city, Elvis lightened up. Jameson was looking at the map, double-checking their location and direction.

"Hey," Elvis said, a grin on his face as he looked at Bower. "Check out the bag." His voice had a conspiratorial tone, as though he were letting her in on the secrets of the universe.

Jameson looked up briefly, seeing Bower starting to open the canvas rucksack at her feet. He was too concerned with their progress. Jameson picked up the radio and spoke with Bosco.

"Top of this rise, you should see a T junction, we're gonna head right, to the south-east, up onto the tableland."

"Roger that," came the reply from Bosco.

Bower rummaged around in the rucksack, bouncing slightly as the truck hit a pothole.

"Does Bosco know you took that?" Jameson asked as Bower pulled out the small, blue civilian band radio.

"No," Elvis replied, unable to wipe the smile off his face.

"He's gonna kick your ass."

Elvis laughed.

Sitting there holding the radio, Bower was again reminded of the alien spaceship. She leaned forward, looking to see if she could catch a glimpse of the UFO flying through space but the jungle obscured her view of the sky. Dark green trees and vines hung down on either side of the road. Occasionally, pockets of blue broke through, but never enough to see more than a fleeting glimpse of the sky.

"Turn it on," Elvis said, gesturing to her. Seemed pretty obvious, really, thought Bower, and yet holding the radio she'd felt mesmerized. What if the aliens are malicious? Did she really want to know before she had to? What good would knowing do? And yet the advocate within her pleaded for reason, telling her that learning more would be good regardless, as then she'd know what she was dealing with. What she was dealing with? Now, there was a thought. So self-centered, so singular in focus, so all consumed. Perhaps that was the problem with humanity, she thought, most days we can barely see past the end of our nose.

Bower wound the electrical crank on the side of the radio, giving it a good turn for a minute or so to charge the batteries and then turned it on. After a few seconds slowly twisting the dial to move between channels she picked up a signal.

*"…Gospel of John teaches us that there's nothing to fear but fear itself…"*

She kept turning and slowly music eked through the static, a distinctly African beat of drums with an electric guitar and a female singer.

*"…Love will keep us strong, forever moving on, never leaving us alone…"*

Ordinarily, this was a station she would have listened to on a Sunday afternoon, regardless of whether she'd heard the artist before. The tune was catchy, but on she went, surfing the radio channels.

*"…highs of a hundred and five, with storms in the late afternoon, early evening…"*

Three stations down and Bower was somewhat relieved not to have found anyone talking about the giant alien craft circling Earth. If anything, it seemed to suggest that life moves on, that not everyone was consumed by the alien presence. Then she found it.

*"…Georgia, where residents have banded together as a community, pooling not only food and water, but medical supplies."*

A different voice spoke in a southern drawl.

*"We've been through a dozen hurricanes, we know what it takes to keep things moving when the economy stops. The sky might be clear, but we understand what it takes to get through a crisis like this, what it takes to kickstart a community and get back on our feet."*

The reporter took up where the resident left off.

*"Across the United States, from Maine to Florida, from New York to Los Angeles, we're seeing a ground-swell of citizen action in place of government programs. Here in Atlanta, Georgia, the residents know the government is largely consigned to the role of historian. As well-meaning as FEMA officials are, the size and scale of a country in turmoil means they're ineffective."*

Another resident spoke, only this time there was a distinct Mexican twinge in the accent and Bower got the impression this man was from nowhere near Georgia.

*"The police, they're too busy. They're running around trying to help everyone, so they can't help anyone at all. They tell me, don't take the law into your own hands. I say, I'm not taking the law, but I'm not standing by either. There are thugs. There are people who take the shirt off your back. When the wolves come, you need to be strong, show them you're not afraid, you're not no sheep. You're not gonna let them take your stuff.*

*"If you're strong, they go away, but that makes the problem worse. They know they can't take nothing from me, but my neighbor, they think they can take her food. So we stand up for each other. We stand up for those that can't stand up for themselves."*

The reporter spoke again.

*"Although officials have refused to sanction local activists like Jesus San Jassan, the reality is, with the US economy struggling to find focus, such groups have taken pressure off the police, fire departments and hospitals. With large portions of the workforce refusing to return to work in the factories and farms around the nation, the National Guard has stepped in, filling a vital hole in the supply chain. Estimates of the flow of essential goods such as fresh food and processed meats are at 80% of normal supply, and yet the shelves are still bare."*

A deep voice came through on the radio as the broadcast switched to another anecdotal testimony from what was intended to be the average man.

*"For the past decade, I've been flying from Miami to Dallas on business at least once a month, but I ain't never seen anything like this, even during the hurricane season. Yesterday, there were three of us. Three people on a plane designed for three hundred. Hell, there were more stewards than there were passengers. We joked around that we should serve them the drinks. It's crazy, man. Ever since this thing turned up, the whole country's been spooked."*

*"We can't get our grain to market,"* another voice said, a woman talking over the sound of heavy machinery whirring in the background. *"We've had a few trucks through, but those drivers are pulling eighteen-hour shifts, working through all the farms in this region. The rest of the drivers haven't been seen for dust. I called the distributor,*

*but the phone just rings out. I've been talking to the factory, and they say they've got surplus for a week or so in the silos, so they ain't too worried, but they can't get enough hands on the factory floor. They're getting stuff out the door, but even just a small drop in supply causes demand to skyrocket. It's all out of balance."*

The reporter spoke in somber tones.

*"US officials are understandably cagey when discussing possible military tactics in the wake of alien contact, and the presence of US fighters conducting daily flights over major US cities is intended more for human attention than as a show of force for the extraterrestrials. NASA officials have confirmed what is described as a 'close working relationship' and 'cooperation' with the Army, Air Force, Marines and the Navy, but what that means in practice is yet to be seen. Speculation is rife."*

*"There is the nuclear option,"* a stern voice opted, and Bower got the impression that whoever was talking was ex-military. *"While that thing was out by the Moon it was untouchable, but if we can see her in orbit we can reach her. All we need to do is weaponize our existing rocket fleet, just like the President suggested. He's our Commander-in-Chief, we voted him in, we need to follow him. I believe in President Addison. He's a good man. The Supreme Court has no right to suspend democracy because a bunch of left-wing liberals don't have the balls to make the hard decisions. We will rue the day we let Congress impeach the man for defending our liberty. Nukes are all we've got against these alien critters. If we don't shoot first, we won't be able to shoot at all."*

*"Others, though, disagree,"* the reporter said. *"They point out that the use of nuclear weapons in space is likely to be counterproductive."*

*"Nuclear weapons,"* said another male voice in sober, measured tones, *"liberate massive amounts of energy. They're spectacular on Earth. A flash of blinding light, a hail of radioactive particles, and the blast wave; a wall of superheated wind and debris, but space is full of radiation and energy already. It's a hostile environment. In space, thermonuclear detonations are nothing more than a mini-star shining but for a second. They're largely ineffective because there's nothing to compress. If we were to detonate a nuke on the alien craft the electromagnetic pulse would take out any nearby satellites, say within a thousand kilometer radius, and we could end up losing valuable communication satellites or GPS capabilities for our military here on Earth. Whether we would cause any damage to the alien craft is debatable. From what NASA has observed, the alien shielding is capable of dissipating nuclear fusion, so it's unlikely anything we could throw at them is going to even scratch the surface, let alone cause a mortal wound. Nukes just aren't the silver bullet everyone thinks they are."*

Another voice cut in, a woman's voice.

*"This isn't the movie Independence Day, there's no hero to save us by shooting coke cans off the side of a UFO. If it comes to a fight, it's probably*

*going to be over very quickly and the outcome will be one sided. The aliens have adopted a polar orbit instead of circling above the equator. By doing this, they're able to view every square inch of Earth in roughly a day and a half. If we turn this into a nuclear exchange there's not a place on Earth they couldn't bomb from orbit. They could obliterate human life over the weekend, so lets keep our pride and ego in check for a bit. There's no war, let's not start one. Now is the time for prudence and cool heads."*

The reporter cut in, giving another perspective.

*"And US concerns aren't confined to a potential space war. In the deep south of the country, the proliferation of small arms such as handguns and shotguns has stressed local police and state troopers, with reports coming through of murders to settle long-standing scores as well as petty crime escalating into murder. In one case, as yet unconfirmed, a neighbor was shot and killed in a dispute over water from a bore, while reports have come through of people being murdered over the possession of basic ingredients such as flour, sugar and powdered milk.*

*"There's no doubt the emergency laws passed by the government have stemmed the initial lawlessness and panic that gripped the US, but rebuilding the trust of a nation in shock will take some time. And, as yet, there has been no direct contact with the alien craft."*

The speaker changed to a woman with an indistinct accent that could have been from anywhere within the mid-west.

*"Don't tell me there's been no contact. You don't have someone turn up on your doorstep from the other side of the country without hearing from them first. And yet you want me to think these aliens could come from a million miles away without someone knowing? Without someone inviting them? I don't know what happened at Roswell, but it wasn't no military weather balloon.*

*"The military's been lying to us for decades. They've been lying to the American people, lying to the government, lying to everyone. They're the only ones who could have kept this secret. The government could never do it, they could never keep their mouths shut, but the military thrives on secrecy. I'm telling you, this is what Eisenhower warned us about, the military-industrial complex. All this, it's been on the plans since then, since the late 50s. Look at the Federal budget. Look at what we spend on the military. Forget about the Democrats and Republicans, it's the military that runs this country. Always have, always will."*

*"And,"* the reporter said, cutting in over the top of the woman, *"such sentiments are not isolated."*

A Texan accent came across the airwaves.

*"It's been easy to laugh at abductees. It's been easy to laugh at those that saw a UFO and say they were drunk or delusional, but who's laughing now? Now the grays are here in force, does anyone take NASA seriously anymore? And yet NASA still maintains the party line, saying, 'there's been*

*no contact.' Who are they kidding? We heard them bugs speak on the radio. I'm telling you, NASA has sold us out. They've been planning our enslavement for decades.*

*"The government's been trying to disarm the populace for the past fifty years, trying to take away our rights, to get to our guns, and now we know why, so Earth would capitulate without a fight. Well, I don't know about you, but I'm fighting. Ain't no alien gonna take my guns. Washington might surrender, but any goddamn alien sets foot in Texas he's gonna be eating lead."*

"Damn," Elvis said, leaning forward on the broad steering wheel as he turned a corner. "Now, that's what I'm talking about."

"You can't be serious," Bower cried, talking over the radio. "You actually want to shoot first and ask questions later?"

"If we don't shoot first, there won't be a later," Elvis replied, with a cocky tone that conveyed surety. He was chewing on some gum as he spoke. "You ever think of that, Doc? I mean, seriously, sure, we all wanna get along, but these are aliens. We've got to show them we're not to be messed with. Peace through strength, it's the only way, Doc."

"What about peace through understanding?" Bower replied, turning the radio down.

"You're talking to a grunt," Jameson said, intervening in the discussion. "Army life is all about peace through hierarchies, peace enforced by authority."

"Please tell me there are cooler heads in Washington," Bower replied. Elvis didn't seem fazed by the implications of his comments at all. "Peace should be the default, not war. After a hundred thousand years, you'd have thought we'd have figured that one out by now."

"It's all about agendas, Doc," Elvis replied. "See, sarge is right. We have peace by adhering to a chain of command. For us, peace is something to be enforced with the threat of violence. Peace ain't no picnic by the lakeside in summer. And so, you gotta ask yourself, Doc, why are they here? What's their agenda?"

"I… I don't know, but that's not a bad thing. We'll know soon enough. We don't have to assume hostile intent."

"We do if we want to stay alive," Elvis replied.

"And if they were hostile," she asked, "what could we do about it? This isn't some Hollywood movie where all you've got to do is get down their shield so our planes can fire missiles at them.

"Imagine what would happen if a bunch of bushmen tried to attack you Rangers. Even if they got a spear away, you'd mow them down. They wouldn't stand a chance. The difference between us and these aliens is going to be orders of magnitude greater. Any aggressive act by us would be suicidal."

"Better dead than red," was all Elvis would say in reply, quoting an old Cold War mantra. Bower was tempted to take things further, but there was no genuine interest in debate on his part. Bower was frustrated by his close-minded attitude. Her words were falling on deaf ears.

The radio broadcast was still going, the topic grabbed her attention so she turned up the radio.

*"We actually know quite a lot about them already,"* said a woman in calm tones. *"We know they're bound by the laws of physics. They didn't just materialize in our sky, they approached us over several months, and that tells us something important about their technology. Their spaceship is more advanced than any of ours, but not by tens of thousands or hundreds of thousands of years, probably just in the order of a few hundred years to a thousand years at most.*

*"Bear in mind, given the immense age of the universe and the almost four billion years during which life has evolved on Earth, a gap of a million years between intelligent species from different planets would not be unrealistic. If anything a gap of a million years would be quite small. That these aliens appear so close to us from the perspective of the physics we see in use is actually encouraging.*

*"If the physical appearance of their craft is any indication to go by, their technology is based around what we would call biology. But, biology is simply physics applied to chemistry. Their craft appears almost organic, whereas our spacecraft are functional, designed without any regard to aesthetics. Their craft appears to be alive. Now, that could be an illusion, but spectroscopic analysis and radar suggests the spacecraft we see is a living organism rather than a collection of nuts and bolts.*

*"As for their possible physiology, we can draw some clues from their approach within our solar system. Bear in mind that in slowing down over a period of months, they could choose any particular speed they wanted. If they slowed themselves faster, they'd arrive earlier, that's all. But that they slowed at one sixth of the acceleration we feel on Earth, roughly the same rate as gravity on the Moon, suggests this was a comfortable approach for them. If this assumption is correct, then they're probably not going to be too comfortable here on Earth. Our gravity wouldn't crush them, but it wouldn't be pleasant. It would be like carrying your mother-in-law around on your back everywhere you went.*

*"Now some people have raised concerns that all we've heard from the craft is a single, repeated message declaring their peaceful intentions. They wonder why we haven't heard anything beyond that, thinking we should have established some kind of dialogue with this alien species by now. It's been pointed out that the alien message was in every known language, including some that are geographically confined and essentially redundant, so the alien creatures seem proficient in communicating. But, again,*

*everything we see is revealing. This limited form of communication tells us something important about our alien visitors and their level of technological advancement."*

Bower was hooked on every word. She barely noticed the bumps in the road or the noise from the truck engine.

*"They're capable of communicating broadly and simply, but not in detail. In the same way, we can process whale calls, taking samples and conducting statistical analysis of behavior patterns to construct a certain message that would be easily understood by other whales. We could even construct such an individual message for each species of whale, using their own distinct dialects, but we couldn't necessarily hold a conversation with a whale. Again, this reinforces the notion that this alien species is hundreds, but not thousands of years ahead of humanity. Whatever means they have of communicating among themselves, it is vastly different from human speech, placing an impediment in their path when communicating with us.*

*"And for the conspiracy theorists, it is important to note there's been no attack. There have been no ray guns or super-fast spacecraft racing around, strafing the ground and blowing things up. If we look at the timing of their acts, from entering the solar system, to approaching Earth, to waiting at the Lagrange point, to announcing their presence, to moving into an Earth orbit, we can see there's a pattern. They're moving at a slow, deliberate pace. They're giving us time to accept their presence. They're not rushing in. This is much the same way we would approach an animal in the wild."*

Bower was fascinated with the scientific press conference. She wasn't sure who was talking, but this lady knew her stuff. She had to be from one of the space agencies. As her accent was American, Bower assumed she was from NASA.

*"We can observe structures on the craft that match Fibonacci sequences. This is something important to note, as it is a clue to what we suppose is the organic nature of the alien vessel.*

*"For those of you that aren't familiar with the term, Fibonacci was the first person to note that sizes and shapes in nature are ruled by a simple numeric principle where numbers in a sequence are added to each other to find the next number. Starting with zero and one, one plus one equals two. Two plus one equals three. Three plus two equals five. Five plus three equals eight, eight plus five equals thirteen, and so on, with the pattern always growing by the same proportion as the numbers get larger and larger.*

*"This pattern is important because it's natural. We see it everywhere in our world, even if we don't realize it. Look at the swirl of a sea shell, or the point at which branches stem out of a tree or the veins on a leaf, or the shape of a hurricane as seen from space; these all fan out using numbers*

*found in the Fibonacci sequence. Pineapples, pine cones and sunflower seeds all grow in a pattern described by Fibonacci numbers. Look at the length of your upper arm relative to your forearm, or your thigh relative to your lower leg and you'll find the same basic ratio described by Fibonacci.*

*"In regards to the alien craft, our telescopes can resolve segmentation in the cilia, the fine tentacle like appendages surrounding the girth of the craft. The ridges covering the body of the spacecraft follow the same scaly pattern we see on snakes and lizards, with the length and breadth of each section following the Fibonacci ratio. Toward the rear of the craft, hidden in shadow, there are slits or fins, similar to what we see in the mouth of Baleen whales. Although we've seen no sign of chemical propellants, we suspect these structures provide propulsion. As a proportion of the overall length of the craft, they too match the Fibonacci ratio."*

Bower wasn't sure how much of this Elvis understood, but he seemed to be listening intently, as was Jameson.

*"From this we infer that the alien creatures themselves must have harnessed some biological process to construct their craft with a form of biotechnology native to their world, perhaps using the equivalent of what we would call nanotechnology. Certainly, the oily, metallic rainbow sheen seen on the underbelly in low light echoes experiments with nano-materials on Earth. At its current altitude, over a thousand miles above the surface of __"*

The radio crackled.

"Sarge, we've got Marines holding the airport."

Static broke up Bosco's voice as he continued to talk. "They said fighting is fierce to the north and east, with armed militias in the south. They advise we approach from the west, coming through the city, using the supply route from Mozambique."

Jameson's face lit up.

"Tell them we owe them a round of beers, semper fi."

"Roger that," came the reply from Bosco. "Hey, could you pass a message to Elvis for me?"

"Sure."

"Tell that Southern fucker, if he touches my stuff again he'll be joining Elvis Presley singing Hound Dog at the Pearly Gates."

Jameson laughed, looking over at Elvis and the grin on his face. "Consider it done. Over."

He unfolded his map, allowing it to sit slightly on Bower and up against the dashboard as his finger ran over the lines and curves.

"OK, we're here, about eighty clicks north of Lilongwe. We need to get off this road, cut inland and then south-west, as though we were heading for the border, before turning back to the capital."

Bower didn't say anything, but the thought of spending more time bouncing around in their antiquated old truck, with its tired seat

springs and stiff suspension, didn’t exactly fill her with joy.

# Chapter 07: Seeds

As evening approached, the Rangers drove against the exodus fleeing Lilongwe. Refugees trudged against the setting sun blazing in their eyes. Thousands of grim faces passed by silently on either side of the truck as the Rangers drove against the human current. There must have been some noise. People must have been talking, but the diesel engine seemed to be the only sound breaking the tension in the air. Africans walked on in a trance, barely acknowledging the US Rangers as they drove past. The swell of men, women and children spread out beyond the dusty track and into the surrounding plains. They shuffled on with their hand-carts, goats and cows in tow.

Bower sat there feeling numb at the tide of human misery. The truck followed the Hummer east toward Lilongwe, slowly weaving its way through the refugees.

Bower's heart went out to those staggering on toward what they thought of as freedom in Mozambique. They couldn't know the misery that would await them in the overcrowded camps. There was nothing she could do, nothing any of them could do. Without a concerted effort from the International Community there was no way to prevent Malawi from imploding. On they drove, kicking up dust, but the refugees didn't seem to notice.

With the sun sitting low in the sky behind them, long shadows stretched across the land, giving the Acacia trees and thorn bushes an ominous, dark feel. Ahead, the alien mothership soared high in the sky, a thousand miles above Earth, radiant in the soft pinks and yellows of the sunset.

Fine specks of dust fell from the back of the alien craft.

Bower felt a chill run down her spine.

Her perception of majesty was replaced with a sense of dread as she realized debris was peeling away from the alien spacecraft. From where they were, tiny pricks of light appeared to trail behind the spaceship, falling behind the craft as it sailed on. Like dust blown from a window ledge, the flecks caught the light of the setting sun. Flashes broke in the sky like fireflies, flaring as thousands of smaller alien vessels entered the atmosphere. Like embers from a campfire, sparks trailed behind the alien mothership, stretching out for hundreds of miles as they slowly drifted to Earth.

Elvis saw it too.

"What the…"

Jameson looked up from his map. He grabbed the radio.

"Bosco. Are you seeing this?"

"Affirmative. What the hell is that?"

“I don’t know,” Jameson replied.

“If it’s the alien equivalent of a cluster bomb, we’re fucked.”

“No shit.”

Bower leaned forward, looking up at the sky, trying to estimate how closely overhead the craft would pass. It was difficult to tell as the distances involved were deceptive.

The alien spaceship appeared to be moving diagonally across the sky to the north of them, but the dust trail spread out like the wake of a ship. Although the trail appeared to dissipate, Bower doubted whether the particles had disappeared, just that they’d lost sight of the smaller component parts. Several larger sections cut through the atmosphere like meteors, leaving vapor trails in the stratosphere.

“Is it disintegrating?” Bower asked. “Maybe this is good. Maybe their ship is falling apart.”

Elvis and Jameson both looked at her with a look that made her feel stupid.

“How big do you think they are?” she asked.

“Big,” Jameson replied.

“That’s some serious shit,” Elvis said in a matter-of-fact tone of voice. “Hey, maybe they’re sowing seeds, just like a farmer would.”

“You think they’re seeding Earth?” Bower asked.

“With what?” Jameson added.

No one answered.

No one wanted an answer.

Bower wound the crank on the radio, giving the batteries a bit of charge before turning it on. Bosco had tried to take the radio back when they stopped for lunch, but Bower had kept it with her. Somehow, because she was a civilian her possession of the civilian band radio seemed to make sense.

They had listened to a couple of broadcasts earlier in the afternoon, but the general apathy in the cab of the truck suggested it was time to turn it off, so she had. At that time, Bower found even her curiosity had waned. There was only so much gloom she could take. If this was the end of the world, she didn’t want to know.

Bower stared out at the rugged landscape, watching as fine, dark pinpricks appeared in the sky, peppering the majestic blue atmosphere as they descended slowly to Earth. She wondered if everything would change from this point forward, if this was the last she’d see of this sunbaked continent that had nurtured life on Earth for hundreds of millions of years. Bower twisted the radio handle, barely aware of what she was doing, lost in thought.

Africa wasn’t beautiful. Africa was stark. As they drove along, there were no romantic illusions to sweep them up in a sense of awe or majesty. Africa was barren, a dry husk. Driving past vultures

cleaning the bones of a wildebeest kept life in perspective. Nature was cruel. And yet the harsh reality of life and death in Africa still gave relief from the unknown, the impending dread of alien contact. Now, it seemed their fears had been realized. Bower felt Jameson and Elvis silently willing her to hurry as she cranked the handle on the side of the radio.

*"…contact first in Iowa, with umbrella seeds spreading up through Canada and the Arctic, across Siberia, Mongolia, China and Western Australia before crossing Antarctica and into Africa. Reports have also come in of floaters, gigantic alien creatures resembling what could only be described as flying jellyfish."*

The voice changed to that of a woman.

*"At this point, the State Department is refusing to consider this an attack or an invasion, saying they are waiting on NASA to provide more information on the nature of these alien artifacts and the intrusion of alien craft into our atmosphere.*

*"The US Air force has circled and followed several of the so-called floaters in a variety of military aircraft, from helicopters to a C130 Hercules. These intercepts have been undertaken for the purpose of photographing and observing the floaters, relaying the information to NASA. There have been no hostile acts undertaken by either party."*

There was stunned silence within the cab of the truck. Bower wanted to grab the speaker on the radio and shake her, how could they not see this as an invasion? For all her posturing with Elvis, she secretly shared his fears. Somehow, in siding with him mentally in that moment she felt safer, as though she were aligning with someone stronger, someone better able to defend her. It was a fleeting thought, but in those few seconds the notion was overwhelming.

*"A spokesman for the United Nations has noted that the alien mother ship is showing no consideration for international boundaries or geographical countries, either as we recognize them, or as they exist in the form of landmasses. The seeding, as it is being called, is following an orbital pattern that bisects rather than comprehensively covers various countries. Congress has issued a statement calling for calm, urging citizens not to panic. And - just a moment - we're crossing live to Capitol Hill where senior NASA scientist, Dr. Frederick Enrado is addressing the House."*

Dr. Enrado had a slight twang in his accent, indicating English wasn't his native tongue. Bower couldn't place his Spanish-like pronunciation, but she didn't think he was from Mexico. She wasn't sure why, but she got the feeling he originated from one of the countries in Central America.

"I appreciate that there is an overwhelming amount of interest in the activities of the alien spacecraft and what the media has labeled the seedlings, but I must stress that conjecture and guesswork will

only inflame a sense of fear. At this time it is important that we remain composed and do not react. We are in a time of transition, a time of initial contact. It is important that we maintain a sense of order until the situation becomes clearer.

*"We have established a coarse form of dialogue with the alien entity. As you can appreciate, like any two people from different cultures with different languages, without any common ground between them, communication is limited.*

*"In an attempt to quell the uncertainty and sense of fear, NASA, ESA and SETI are providing transcripts and the raw feed through the various member agency websites. Please remember, the point of this transparency is to counteract the conspiracy theories circulating on the Internet and in the media. At this point, we caution the general public not to read anything into the discussion beyond what is officially stated by NASA.*

*"We have to take our extraterrestrial visitors at face value when they say they come in peace, even if we don't understand their methods. To react with hostility would be to act without any basis or design.*

*"At this point, our dialogue is limited to basic concepts, the exchange of simple identifiers such as Earth, stars, moon, spaceship, etc. If you've seen the transcripts already, you'll know it is much like talking to a preschooler. In that regard, NASA is developing a primer, a means of exchange that will grow in complexity over time.*

*"Reading from one of the transcripts, an example of one exchange is: We come in peace. We come for life. We come in peace. We come from a star. We come in peace. We come from afar."*

Elvis couldn't help himself, blurting out, "It's fucking Dr. Seuss! The goddamn Cat in the Hat is back."

As funny as that observation was, Bower felt irritated. She wanted to hear what was being said, not some wise-crack from a grunt.

The radio broadcast continued.

*"As you can appreciate, the consistent theme in these early messages is to reinforce peaceful intentions. For us to assume anything else would be foolish."*

*"I am asked what we know about the seedlings that have landed throughout the world. Unfortunately, we do not know much more than you do. Until we can establish field research efforts, media reports are the best sources of information we have, and NASA is working with several news crews on location to document the alien phenomena in detail so we can begin to draw some scientific conclusions. So what do we know?"*

He paused, and they could hear the sound of paper being shuffled.

*"I am reading to you directly from field reports. These have been subject only to initial oversight by our contact science team, so any points made here this afternoon are subject to revision as more information comes*

*to hand."*

Elvis snapped, yelling at the radio. "For fuck's sake, man. Spit it out."

As if in reply, Dr. Enrado continued. *"The pods or seeds as they're called do not pose an immediate, active threat. Although we do not know their exact composition or their purpose, they appear to be made of some kind of biodegradable resin. They are not directly harmful to humans in that they do not pose a physical threat such as a poison. Having said this, it is the recommendation of NASA that you do not touch or move any pods you may find. Please, leave them where they fall, and remain well away from them until we can determine a subsequent course of action.*

*"The umbrella-like parachutes the pods descend on are flimsy and fragile, deteriorating rapidly in what appears to be some form of oxidation. We have taken samples which are en-route to our labs for analysis, but it will take time to investigate this phenomenon properly at a microscopic level so we ask for patience and understanding."*

From the background noise on the radio, Bower got the distinct impression no one in Washington DC watching the briefing live was any more patient than Elvis.

"The floating entities that have been described as jellyfish appear to be related to the appearance of the pods. Their frequency is far less, appearing only once every couple of hundred square miles, while the pods are spread with a frequency of anywhere from a few hundred feet to a couple of miles.

*"The floaters appear to be living organisms resembling a squid or a jellyfish. The large dark purple, bladder-like structure at its head appears to provide buoyancy in much the same way as an airship or a zeppelin. The trailing tentacles have not been observed making contact with the ground. I must repeat that. There have been no confirmed cases of any contact with the ground from a floater. Also, from what we can determine, the tentacles are not involved in propulsion. They have been observed streaming in front of floaters moving with the prevailing winds, and drifting behind them when these alien creatures head into the wind.*

*"As I mentioned earlier, the air-force has approached these creatures, circling within a couple of hundred meters of them in fighter craft, and the floaters have remained inert, ignoring our presence.*

*"At this point, the prevailing wisdom is not to provoke a military conflict, but rather to pursue peaceful means, opening dialogue before entering into hostilities. I'm aware there is considerable opposition to this approach, but I must emphasize, any potential conflict is likely to be one-sided and very much against mankind."*

"MOTHER FUCKER," yelled Elvis, clearly not agreeing. "What the hell is everyone so goddamn afraid of… show them a little muscle, earn some respect."

And with that, Bower mentally shifted sides away from Elvis again.

*"Please,"* Dr. Enrado continued. *"Do not fire upon either the seeds or the floaters. We've had reports of one downed floater in Michigan, apparently in a suicide attack using a light plane. There have also been reports of people gathering seeds, sometimes with the intent of destroying them in a bonfire, at other times with the intent of collecting or worshiping them. NASA urges restraint. Please, give us time for diplomacy. The last thing we need is for this situation to escalate out of hand."*

"Out of hand," cried Elvis. "Has he taken a look out the goddamn window?"

Elvis gestured ahead of the truck, his fingers pointing at the parachute-like descent of hundreds of resin pods drifting on the breeze. Rather than one per square mile, they were coming down no more than ten to twenty feet apart, catching in bushes and trees, landing on the road among the refugees.

One of the pods drifted in front of the truck and Bower got a good look at it. The seed, if it could be called that, was oblong and somewhat transparent. Like thick glass, there was a smokey, golden color to the resin, and it seemed hollow, but with the sun setting behind them she couldn't be sure.

"FUCK."

Elvis swore as he pulled hard to one side on the steering wheel, causing the truck to swerve out of a sandy rut in the track and onto the hard shoulder.

The first thing that ran through Bower's mind was the possibility they'd hit someone. As the truck bounced up over the rocks she had a mental picture of someone being crushed beneath the wheels. Bower was already thinking about what she could and couldn't do medically on the roadside as Elvis slammed on the brakes.

Jameson braced as the truck came shuddering to a stop.

Ahead of them, the Hummer pulled to one side as well.

"What the—" Jameson cried.

"Bosco ran over one of those bloody things," Elvis said, pulling on the handbrake. And Bower found her heart ease a little. She could see the crushed seed in the tire tracks of the Hummer. An amber liquid oozed out onto the sand.

Elvis and Jameson dropped down out of the truck and onto the ground. Bower followed a little less gracefully.

"Smithy," Jameson called out. "Keep your eyes peeled."

Smithy hadn't looked back from where she was perched in the gun-turret of the Hummer. She turned slightly, scanning out in front of them with the machine gun mounted on the vehicle.

Jameson was more concerned with the Hummer than he was the

crushed alien pod. He was looking at the tires, trying to see if there had been any damage to them.

"Damn," Elvis said, crouching down and looking at the crushed amber pod. He had a stick and was poking at the torn umbrella-shaped parachute attached to the pod. The webbing within the chute was no more than a foot in diameter. It disintegrated as he poked at it, with fine flecks trailing into the air like ash.

"Leave that alone, you dumb fuck," cried Bosco.

"Nice driving," Elvis replied, dropping the stick as he stood up. "So, were you stupid enough to aim for this thing on purpose, or were you asleep at the wheel again."

Bosco laughed. "I was too busy trying not to leave your sorry-ass behind."

Bower ignored them. She crouched down and looked at the viscous fluid seeping out of the shattered resin casing.

"What are you thinking?" Jameson asked her. "Ever seen anything like this before?"

"No."

"So, is it a seed?" Elvis asked. "Are they planting alien marijuana on Earth or something?"

Bower wasn't sure if Elvis was trying to be funny or just showing off, but his joke fell flat.

"I have no more idea than you," she replied. "It's certainly not a machine, at least not as we would understand one. There's no moving parts, no sections, no joints, screws or pins. To understand what this is, you'd probably have to look at it under a microscope, and a scanning electron microscope at that."

Bower picked up the stick Elvis had been holding. Carefully, she positioned the stick so it slid inside the shattered remains of the resin pod.

"Oh, man," cried Bosco. "Don't touch that shit. Haven't you ever seen one of these movies?"

Bower looked up at him without saying anything.

"This is what always happens," he continued. "People go sticking their nose where it doesn't belong instead of leaving well enough alone. It always starts out all innocent and like, but then some badass alien invades the movie theatre or climbs out of the sea and there's running and screaming."

"Give it a rest," Jameson said. Bower appreciated his level head.

Slowly, Bower used the stick to pick up the broken, hollow seed, if that's what it was, and looked closely at the construction.

"I'm telling you," Bosco said. "This can only end badly."

"I hate to tell you this," Bower replied. "But if this thing contains a pathogen then we're already exposed."

“Oh great,” Bosco replied. “That’s just fucking great.”

“You shouldn’t have run over it, you dumb shit,” cried Elvis, slapping Bosco on the chest.

“Hey, cut it out,” Jameson said, finishing their banter. “What do you make of it, Doc?”

Although it looked like a glass cylinder at first, on inspection Bower could see it was either an elongated hexagon or an octagon. Pointing at it, she began counting the different faces. There were six sides, making it an elongated, hexagonal cylinder similar to the inside of a honeycomb cell.

In the back of her mind, Bower vaguely remembered something from her university biology lectures. Bees and wasps used hexagonal shapes incidentally and not by deliberate design, they were an emergent property, a byproduct of maximizing every possible space. Pack regular cylinders together and there was a massive amount of wasted space between them. Flex the walls of the cylinders a little and they naturally formed a hexagon, filling up all the available room. Hexagons were nature’s little space savers.

Bower went to say something, but in the quiet of the moment she kept that observation to herself. She didn’t want to sound stupid, or worse, seem to be babbling about something inconsequential. Ordinarily, she wouldn’t have worried what others thought of her, but there was something about the hierarchy within the troop that made her feel like she had to maintain a sense of dignity. They looked up to her as a qualified doctor, at least she thought they did. Or perhaps she was sensing their deference to her as a woman. Either way, she figured she’d only speak up if she had something concrete to contribute.

“It’s disintegrating,” she said, noting that the alien pod was coming apart, and not just because it had been run over.

The light from the setting sun caught the smoky, glassy resin, reminding her of the old dark brown medical bottles. Those had been tinted to prevent light from breaking down the complex chemical molecules within the medicine and she wondered if the same was true here. She doubted any of the attributes she’d noticed were purely coincidental. There was an alien intelligence at work here, but on a biological not a mechanical level.

Goo dripped from the resin casing, running down the stick before dropping to the dusty ground. Sections of the casing slid with the viscous fluid. Both the texture and consistency reminded Bower of honey and treacle.

Someone was tapping her on the shoulder.

Suddenly, Bower was aware they’d been tapping her shoulder for quite some time, but she was too absorbed by what she was looking at

and the sensation had only just registered. It was annoying. If they wanted her for something, why didn't they just say so, why did they have to touch her. Touch was personal. Touch was privileged. She pulled away, deliberately ignoring them, hoping they'd get the message. The hand followed her as she shifted sideways and lay the broken resin casing on the ground.

"What?" she said rather impatiently, wondering what could be so important.

A shadow passed over her, blotting out the setting sun. As she turned she could see all heads facing in one direction. The refugees stood still, their eyes cast up. The soldiers stood silently facing the same way. As she stood, she got her first glimpse of a floater hundreds if not thousands of feet in the air.

There were three of them, stretched out several hundred yards apart. One of the floaters cast its shadow on the truck as the creature drifted north. The sun blazing through the flicking tentacles trailing behind the massive beast.

Bower was entranced. Whereas mankind flew in space in what amounted to tin cans, these aliens creatures were capable of spanning the depths of interstellar space, enduring a bitter cold vacuum and then making the transition to flying within a planet's atmosphere. What were these animals?

Each floater appeared to be hundreds of feet in height, like a blimp, only with a giant, semi-transparent purple bladder keeping them buoyant in the same way in which a bluebottle jellyfish floated on the waves of the sea.

Beneath the inflated bladder sat a mass of what Bower could have only described as organic pulp. Despite her years of medical study and her interest in biology, Bower wasn't prepared for what she was seeing. The mass beneath the presumably gas-filled bubble didn't appear to have any differentiation. Bower was used to seeing biology as functional, practical, with insects and animals having segmentation, being divided into limbs and organs. The base of the floater, though, looked more like the ravaged, torn, raw wound of a gunshot. Behind the creature, a series of tentacles stretched out for thousands of feet, floating on the breeze, drifting lazily to one side then another.

Another floater appeared from over the forest of acacia trees to the south of them. The massive beast looked like it was no more than a few feet above the treetops, causing panic among the refugees but Bower quickly realized this was an illusion of size. From what she could tell, the floaters were at least several hundred feet above the road. Given that their tentacles trailed below and behind them, remaining well clear of the ground, she figured they were somewhere around five or six hundred feet up.

The floater passing directly overhead seemed majestic, strangely beautiful. The refugees cowered, taking cover, as did the soldiers, leaving Bower standing alone in the road staring up at the massive creature as though she were watching a Blue whale swimming within the ocean.

“Bower,” Jameson cried, sheltering beside the truck. His voice was quiet, just a shade above a whisper as he beckoned her over to him.

“They’re ignoring us,” Bower replied, not bothering to lower her voice.

Smithy crouched low in the turret of the Hummer, making herself as small as possible.

Bower breathed deeply, taking in the awe of the moment. Within a minute or so, the creature had passed overhead, leaving long strands whipping slowly back and forth in its wake. The tentacles, if they could be called that, reminded Bower of the elongated tail of a sauropod, slowly tapering to a tip so fine she couldn’t be sure quite where they ended.

With the floaters having passed overhead, the refugees doubled their pace, pushing on, trying to ignore all that was around them. Were they making up for lost time? Bower doubted that, thinking it was simply the single-minded focus of Homo sapiens, the characteristic goal-driven instinct kicking in, pushing them on to what they perceived as safety, and not just from the rebels, but from these alien intruders as well.

“What do you think they want?” Bower asked, absentmindedly, not really directing her question to anyone in particular. “There has to be a reason they’re flying through our atmosphere. And as for these pods, what’s their purpose?”

Kowalski came up beside her.

“Well, I’m just glad they weren’t after us,” he said. “Whatever they want, I’m happy so long as they stay the hell away from me.”

Jameson joined the rest of the soldiers standing by the back of the Hummer. She could hear him talking with his troops.

“Threat assessment?” he asked.

“Scary as hell,” Smithy replied from up in the turret of the Hummer. “But no imminent threat. Not yet, anyway. They didn’t seem to notice us at all.”

“My money would be on a squadron of F22 Raptors,” Elvis added. “As nasty as these floaters seem, they aren’t war machines. Couple of missiles and they’re beached whales.”

“You really think we’re going to catch an evac flight out of here with these things in the air?” asked Bosco. “My money is on CentCom grounding all flights regardless. I think we are alone on this one now.

All bets are off."

Jameson nodded thoughtfully.

"Game plan?" he asked, and yet Bower got the distinct impression he already knew what he was going to do.

"We're fucked if we don't hook up with someone," Elvis offered. "We're too big to hide, too damn small to fight. So long as we're around government troops there's a degree of safety, but I'd feel a whole lot better if we had US soldiers to call on. If we run into rebels or if any of these flying fuckers turned nasty, it's going to be Game Over, Player One."

"Elvis is right," Bosco said. "For once, the Southern Belle has a point. We need to hook up with those Marines in Lilongwe. Safety in numbers. Uncle Sam's not coming back to Malawi, not with monstrous aliens floating overhead at home."

"Somewhere someone's got to be taking the fight to these fuckers," Elvis said. "Please don't tell me the US is letting these Mo-Fo's drift through our airspace without taking a few of them out."

No one offered a reply.

"Lilongwe raises the issue of the chain of command," Jameson said, looking for a response from his soldiers. Bower had moved closer. She figured she and Kowalski might not be soldiers, but they deserved a say in their future. Jameson must have picked up on that, as he clarified his point, opening the huddle to include her and Kowalski. "We're autonomous at the moment. If we hook up with a larger force we'll probably lose a degree of flexibility in decision-making. Regardless of the service, anyone ranking beyond sergeant will assume seniority in the chain of command."

"What he's saying," Elvis said, butting in, "is some panicked dweeb could get us killed with a stupid order."

"The more senior the officer, the bigger the asshole," Smithy called out from the turret of the Hummer.

Jameson softened the point by adding, "Officers can be idealistic, lacking common sense."

"Oh," said Bower, not used to the idea of giving the responsibility of life and death to someone she didn't know and trust already. "So what you're saying is, once we hook up, we're stuck with whoever we get?"

"Lucky dip," Bosco added.

Jameson nodded, turning back to the soldiers. "We're good for one, maybe two engagements, but Elvis is right. We're too big to hide, too small to fight. Besides, the Marines will be in contact with CentCom, we'll be able to report in and get some clarity around the situation."

Elvis spat on the ground. "I'm in."

“Yeah, not a lot of choice,” said Bosco, a hint of reluctance carrying in his voice.

Bower admired the way Jameson worked with his soldiers. He had to know they had no choice given the circumstances. They were less than twenty miles from Lilongwe, yet for Jameson it was important to maintain a sense of unity even this far along the track.

“OK, let’s roll,” he said, walking back to the truck.

As they got underway, Bower looked out at the alien pods. They lay scattered in the distance, spread out hundreds of feet apart on the dry grass or caught in thorny Acacia trees. She didn’t say anything, as no one else seemed to notice and she didn’t want to be alarmist, but they were all broken, they were all leaking. The further they drove, the more sure she became, noting that not only had the fragile, white umbrella-shaped parachutes dissolved in the wind, leaving a brittle skeleton, but the resin casings had ruptured too. They were breaking down, their dark walls giving way and spewing thick, black sludge on the ground.

What did it mean? What did it matter what it meant? Was there anything she could do about it? Had some kind of biological agent been released? Or was she being paranoid, reading too much into some unknown process?

Sitting there, bouncing with the worn suspension of the truck on the rough track, Bower knew she was helpless and that scared her more than any giant creature floating through the sky. For the first time, she thought she could die, that the events unfolding around her could lead to her demise. Her life was out of her control. There was nothing to control, nothing she could change. And this was true for all of humanity.

The floaters had gone, disappearing over the horizon to the north. They appeared to move roughly parallel with each other. In some ways, she preferred having them around. As jarring as they were, they held a sense of awe, but with their passing, Bower was left with a sense of fear for the unknown. What was next? As the sun set and Africa descended into night, she couldn’t shake a pervading fear of the dark.

# Chapter 08: Lilongwe

"He says the Marines are holed up at the airport to the east of the city, but that there are Pakistani soldiers in the old UN compound in the city center," Jameson said, climbing back in the truck after talking with government troops by a roadblock on the outskirts of Lilongwe.

The city was in flames.

A red glow rose over the horizon, lighting up the darkness, silhouetting the buildings of the capital. Sporadic gunfire erupted from around the city. Bower had no idea of the distances involved from the sound, but the soldiers didn't seem too concerned. Can't high-powered bullets travel upwards of a mile or so, she wondered, but it was a question she didn't really want answered.

"The captain reckons it's easily eight miles," Jameson added. "Bosco hasn't been able to raise the Pakis on the shortwave, so we're going to hunker down here for the night and move in with the dawn. Pull the truck up over behind the command post."

"Roger that," Elvis replied, putting the truck in gear and driving around the side of a war-torn building. Bullet holes ran along the concrete. There was no glass in any of the windows, and no light from inside, but Bower was tired. Bad had become a relative term. With the advent of vast alien creatures drifting through the sky, it seemed the worst the civil war had to offer was nothing compared to the threat of an unknown alien menace. In that regard, the building actually seemed inviting, being shelter from what she thought of as prying eyes from the sky.

Funny that, she thought, climbing out of the cab of the truck: the illusion of importance. She felt the world revolved around her even though she knew it didn't. Somehow the alien presence was a personal threat. Bower was torn. On a logical level, she was intrigued by the arrival of an alien intelligence. The doctor and scientist within her had so many questions. And yet her human side worried. Her natural instinct was to fear all that was to come. The future seemed dark. In the depths of her soul she wanted to unwind time, to go back to simpler days, to return to her village hospital. Certainty, that's what had been lost. Bower somehow felt there had been certainty in the midst of a brooding civil war. She smiled at the irony.

As she walked across the dusty ground she noticed a government soldier pissing into the remains of an alien pod. She went to say something to him, but what was there to say?

Jameson led her and Kowalski into a small storage room with single window. Jagged shards of glass stuck out of the window frame. There was no privacy, but at least she knew no one would try

climbing in during the night.

"We're going to get you to bed down here. Try to get some sleep. In addition to the government sentries, we'll have a two-man watch through the night."

Bower nodded.

Kowalski dropped their packs onto the ground.

Bower was surprised by how tired she was. She barely remembered unfolding her sleeping mat and crawling into a thin sheet sack.

Within seconds, it seemed, she was being woken by Kowalski rummaging through his backpack.

Light broke the darkness hanging over Lilongwe. For a moment, Bower thought she caught a glimpse of the alien mothership, but it was a cloud lit up in soft pinks high in the stratosphere. A hot, dry wind blew in from the west. The humidity was already oppressive.

"Rise and shine," Bosco said, sticking his head in the door.

Bower was still trying to process the eight or nine hours that had vanished in a fleeting moment. Kowalski had already repacked his bag. He offered her some water, which she gladly accepted.

"I need to—"

"Latrine's behind the guardhouse," Bosco replied. "Unisex."

Bower faked a smile. As she walked past Jameson he handed her a bullet-proof vest saying something she missed with the sound of gunfire close by.

"I'll just be a…"

There was no need to go on. Jameson knew. He continued rummaging around in the back of the Hummer. Elvis and Bosco were joking around with each other, laughing about something.

Smithy was checking the bulky magazine on the lightweight machine gun. Bower got the distinct impression she shouldn't dawdle.

The smell from the toilet was overwhelming.

One of the young Rangers followed her over and stood outside the latrine with his M4 rifle in hand. He looked outward, away from the toilet, toward at the checkpoint. He must have followed her on Jameson's orders, even though she was barely thirty feet away.

"Thanks," she said after she came back out. The young man simply smiled in reply and followed her back to the rest of the Rangers. His helmet looked too big for his head. Bower couldn't suppress the realization that she was being protected by a kid with a machine gun. He looked barely out of high school.

The bulletproof vest was uncomfortable, designed for men. Bower fiddled with the webbing on the shoulders, trying to let the breastplate out a little as she walked back over to join the soldiers.

"Here, let me help you with that."

Bower looked up to see Smithy with her helmet off. Although her blonde hair was cropped short and messy, she was pretty. Her petite face had a natural beauty, one that didn't need makeup to accentuate her features. It was no wonder Elvis joked about her being Combat Barbie. Smithy really did look out of place among the Rangers. She belonged in a Vogue magazine, not a civil war.

Smithy loosened the waist strap for Bower.

"Feels like you're carrying lead weights over your shoulders, huh?"

"Yeah," Bower replied sheepishly.

"Not the most practical or fashionable of outfits," Smithy continued, adjusting the straps for her. "But, hey, out here you don't want to attract unwanted attention."

"How do you do it?" Bower asked. She hoped Smithy understood what she meant by 'it.' Everything associated with Army life seemed so contrary to a pretty young girl like Smithy, but that was the thing about stereotypes, she figured, they never fit everyone.

Smithy shrugged her shoulders. She was shy, which surprised Bower. From what Bower had seen of the young lady, Smithy was able to hold her own with the male troops, and yet deep down she really wasn't some tough-as-nails butch woman. If anything, she seemed more feminine than Bower.

"I'm the youngest of five kids, four of them boys, so I'm used to the banter."

"But to fire at someone?" Bower asked, not able to bring herself to use the word kill.

"Yeah, that's a bit nasty. I don't think anyone really likes it, but it's one of those things you've got to do, you know, like washing out an old garbage can with maggots and stuff. You don't want to touch it, but you know what's right so you just get on with the job."

Bower was silent.

"Hey, I've got something," cried Bosco, holding the handset for the shortwave radio. The radio itself was seated on the hood of the Hummer, its three-foot long aerial extended. Bosco kept talking into the radio as the others gathered around. Jameson was pointing at something on a map next to the radio, talking with Elvis. Kowalski leaned over, taking a good look, although Bower doubted he knew what he was looking at. Bower strained to understand the words being spoken over the haze of static.

"…avoid northern routes… main clear… sporadic rebel attacks on Dupoint Road…"

The mood among the soldiers was upbeat.

Jameson turned to her and said, "We can't get hold of the Marines, but the Pakistanis have a convoy heading for the airfield this

afternoon," Jameson said to her. "There's a flight from Nairobi, Kenya, heading to Pretoria in South Africa. It's due to touch down to pick up stragglers and will be on the ground for no more than thirty minutes at 1500 hours. That's our ticket out of here."

He smiled, grabbing Bower by the shoulder. "You're going home. 24 hours from now, all this is going to be a just a fleeting memory, just another wild yarn to share with your family."

"And you?"

"We have to get in contact with Af-Com out of Dar es Salaam in Tanzania, but it would make no sense for us to stay in-country. We're separated from our unit. More than likely, they'll have us fly out with you to South Africa and from there, stateside."

Bower forced a smile.

She wasn't sure what she felt inside. She was grateful, of that she was sure, but it seemed too good to be true. Everything had fallen in place.

"Fucking US Air Force, baby," cried Elvis, his eyes hidden behind his gold-rimmed sunglasses. "Ain't no one keeping them out of the skies."

One of the soldiers came running over from the checkpoint, having been talking with several of the African guards. "We're good to go."

"OK," Jameson cried, grabbing his M4 from where it leaned against the side of the Hummer. "Let's roll."

They pulled out onto the dusty road. The African soldiers manning the checkpoint waved them on, their yellow teeth showing as they grinned and smiled cheerfully. Several of them called out, but Bower couldn't make out what they were saying.

Elvis leaned out the window of the truck, yelling, "Yee-haw."

The Hummer pulled ahead of the truck and began driving down the wide boulevard leading into the city. Tall palms lined the road. Ragged, single-story buildings stretched out on either side of the street. For the most part, they were made from large sandstone blocks, but beyond them loomed taller concrete buildings, stark and impersonal. It was as though Lilongwe had no soul. Black soot marred the walls above the empty window frames, marking where flames had licked out from within the burnt-out ruins.

Those few people on the street quickly disappeared at the sound of the approaching vehicles. Wary eyes peered out through broken windows. Ahead, smoke rose from the shattered frame of an overturned truck blocking a side road. Smoldering tires formed a barricade blocking the entrance to a narrow alleyway running parallel with the side road, barely wide enough for a soldier to move down. A bloodied arm hung from the scarred rooftop.

“You thinking what I am?” came a voice across the radio.

“Guerrilla warfare,” replied Jameson. “If this is the first mile, I suspect the army is being over-optimistic. I doubt they have control of the city. Best pick up the pace. Keep an eye on those rooftops.”

“Roger that.”

Bower could see rifle barrels sticking out of either side of the Hummer ready to return fire.

Jameson turned toward Bower, seated in the middle of the truck’s bench seat.

“If we come under fire, we keep moving, OK?”

“OK,” Bower replied, not sure what she was agreeing to.

“It’s important to understand that, regardless of what happens, our best option is to keep moving. If the Hummer takes a hit from an RPG it could disable the vehicle. If that happens, we won’t stop. If we stop, we’re concentrated in one place. The best thing we can do is to keep going, get out of the kill zone and then look to render assistance. If we get caught in the kill box it’s all over.”

Bower was silent. For Jameson, ‘disable the vehicle’ was a euphemism for seeing his men maimed and killed in an instant. These were people he’d served with for years. As a doctor, Bower knew what it meant to divorce herself in life or death situations. To disconnect her feelings wasn’t easy, compassion wasn’t something she could ignore, and yet once her head was in that space a sense of detachment allowed her to make swift, decisive, clinical decisions. She understood the necessity of that kind of thinking, but it wasn’t like unplugging a TV or switching off a light. It cost something.

“Likewise, if we take a hit, they’ll keep going. They won’t leave us, but they’ll move away from us so they can outflank any incoming attack.”

She nodded.

“If that happens, we will need to take cover until they can assist. We may have to move out on foot.”

He was looking deep into her eyes, maintaining an uncomfortable level of eye contact, and she knew what he was doing. He needed to know she understood. As simple as his sentences were, Bower understood the implicit meaning. If anyone was wounded or hurt, there was little that could be done for them in the short term. This wasn’t the movies. There were no heroics that could defy the physics of a bullet moving faster than the speed of sound.

“Left 200 meters,” came the call over the radio.

Elvis had sped up to keep pace with the Hummer, staying uncomfortably close to the lead vehicle. They raced around the corner. Africans, caught unawares, darted off the road and into side alleys. Several of them were carrying AK-47s, either slung over their

shoulder or in a casual grip. In any regard, they seemed more interested in getting away from the Rangers than starting trouble. In the distance, Bower could see the blackened remains of a bus lying on its side, blocking the road.

"Right 100 meters."

They turned down a narrow alleyway, reacting to the roadblock. The buildings reached three to four stories in height as they moved further into the city. The alley narrowed. Bower felt as though the walls were closing in. A cluster of power lines wound their way between poles running the length of the alley. Bower could see clothes hung out to dry between the buildings, splashes of color against the otherwise dull, sandy browns.

"Left 50 meters."

They turned into a broad street. An overturned truck forced them onto the other side of the road for a few seconds.

"Looking an awful lot like a coordinated system of barricades," Bosco said over the radio.

"You think they're corralling us?" Jameson asked. "Setting up a choke point?"

"They were corralling someone," came the reply, "But I doubt they're targeting us. I doubt they want to tangle with US soldiers."

"Let's get the fuck out of here before they figure out we're not an effective fighting force."

"Roger that."

The sweep of the road curved to the left and the Rangers found themselves bearing down on a battle easily a quarter of a mile in the distance. The sound of gunfire echoed off the buildings around them. Government forces were spread out along either side of the street firing on rebels further down the road.

"Get us the hell out of here," Jameson cried over the radio.

"Already on it," came the reply. "Right 20 meters."

One, two and then three bullets struck silently on the windshield, high and to the left above Elvis. Cracks ran through the glass like spider webs. Elvis hit the brakes hard as he turned to follow the Hummer. Bower thought he'd been hit by the gunfire. She was surprised by how suddenly and quietly the bullet holes appeared. She wasn't sure what she expected, but a lethal blow landing without warning, without any pomp and ceremony, didn't seem right.

As they raced down the alley, she turned toward him.

"I'm OK," he snapped as her fingers poised by his shoulder ready to help. Elvis never took his eyes off the alley. There were holes behind him, marking where the incoming rounds had punched through the sheet metal and into the rear of the cab. The canvas lining on the outside of his helmet had been torn in a sharp, horizontal line,

marking where one of the bullets had grazed the Kevlar.

"I'm fine," he growled.

For Bower, the realization of how close they'd come to disaster was terrifying.

"Indirect fire," Elvis barked. "Unlucky stray. Goddamn, what a stupid, fucked up way to go out, not even on the end of accurate fire. Shit."

He seemed to be angry with himself, which confused Bower.

Jameson was on the radio to Bosco. He must have known Elvis was fine and had already rolled on to the next issue, whereas Bower was caught in the moment, reeling from what had happened.

She bounced uncomfortably in her seat as they darted down the alleyway. Women held their children back as the Hummer and truck raced by just inches away. Dogs scampered for cover. They crossed a main road and continued on down the alleyway. They were traveling too fast. As they hit the curb, leading up back into the alley, Bower found herself propelled in the air, almost hitting the roof.

"Can the Pakis render support?" Jameson cried into the radio.

"Negative," Bosco replied. "They're holed-up. They're not going to risk troops before the push to the airfield. We're on our own."

"Fuck," Jameson replied, his knuckles white as he gripped the radio.

"Left 50 meters. We're no more than four miles out."

They turned onto a dual highway with a low, concrete median strip in the center of the road. People walked along pushing hand-carts, moving with no particular sense of urgency, staring at them in wonderment as they sped by.

Bower was relieved to hear they were heading in the right direction, cutting down the distance to their destination. It had felt like they were going in circles. All the buildings looked the same: drab sandy brown facades stained by the desert. At the frantic speed they were traveling her body felt as rattled as her confidence.

The two-vehicle convoy drove past a park. There were no trees. Dead grass covered a small hill. Heat waves shimmered in the bright sunlight. A set of swings and a slide sat side-by-side on the dry, dusty ground. Beyond the swings lay a burnt-out tank with its right track blown off. Kids crawled under and around the tank, having no interest in the swings. They were pointing their fingers, firing at each other.

Black smudges marred the ground sporadically throughout the park, as though someone had spilled oil, but Bower knew better. The odd skeletal frame of an alien pod's umbrella lay in the scorching sun. The pods themselves were gone, having melted like snow in summer.

Further along the road they raced past a hospital. Bullet holes scarred the five-story building. There was no movement from inside,

at least no obvious movement. Most of the windows were broken.

Bower felt a pang of guilt. She knew what was happening within those walls. The lack of regular, consistent power, poor hygiene, limited supplies and an absurd workload would have rendered the hospital no better than those of the American civil war. Surgery would be little more than butchery. So much misery; so little that could be done. That hospital represented everything that was wrong with Africa: good intentions overwhelmed by the cruelty of man. She'd seen it before, countless times throughout Africa. Anyone with injuries that warranted hospitalization fared no better than a condemned man on death row.

"Coming up on the markets," came the call over the radio, and the vehicles backed off, slowing as they turned into a broad, open square. A sea of heads spread out before them, marking hundreds if not thousands of people in what amounted to little more than a dusty field. Makeshift stalls struggled feebly to shade buyers and sellers. Horses, cows, goats and pigs were penned up in absurdly small stalls, looking languid in the heat. Leafy vegetables wilted in the sun. Flies buzzed in swarms around those stalls selling raw fish and freshly slaughtered meat. The noise of people bartering overwhelmed the sound of the truck engine.

The Hummer slowed to a crawl as a sea of Africans swarmed around them, trying to sell them produce. They called out, holding up live chickens by their feet, holding melons, pumpkins and gourds.

Elvis was busy turning people away from his door while trying not to run down any one foolish enough to scoot between the vehicles. Kids called out, asking for candy. Women held up ornate garments and golden jewelry, all calling for attention.

Bosco was on the radio.

"Smithy wants to know if you want her to fire a burst over their heads to get them to clear out."

"Negative," Jameson replied. "We'd cause a stampede. Just keep rolling slowly forward."

Bosco kept hitting his horn, honking at the throng that lay before them. A couple of kids climbed up on the sidesteps of the truck, hitching a ride. They were harmless. Bower could see they were showing off, putting on an exhibition for their friends. They smiled, revealing crooked, yellowed teeth and unrelenting joy. They weren't wearing any shirts. Their skinny arms looked anemic, but that didn't bother them; they'd found Americans.

"Come on, kid," Elvis said. "Let someone else on the ride."

Bower couldn't believe him. Elvis was encouraging them. Sure enough, that kid of eight or nine hopped down, only to be replaced by another in his early teens. The teen cheered, holding onto the window

frame as he stood on the running board. He pumped his free arm in the air.

It took almost twenty minutes to clear the market. As they approached the far side of the market the crowd seemed to understand they were departing and peeled away, allowing them to leave.

"Can you believe that?" Bower asked.

"That's the thing about Africa," Jameson replied. "They're not that different from us. We just think they are. They love, they hate, they cry, they make mistakes. They're human, just like we are."

Bower was genuinely surprised by Jameson's attitude. She'd only ever seen soldiers as hired muscle, mindless thugs that happened to be on her side rather than the other guy's side, but she couldn't have been more wrong. Her few days with the Rangers had shown her a different side to the army. They were doing a job, a nasty job no man would ever wish on another, but one that needed to be done regardless, and yet they too were human.

The Hummer and truck weaved around the edge of the market and moved back onto the quiet streets.

"Is it just me?" Elvis asked. "Or was that surreal? It's like everyone in the whole goddamn city was in there. Out here, it's a ghost town again."

"I don't like ghosts," Jameson replied. "Keep your eyes peeled."

A few minutes later Bosco cut in over the radio. "Left in 150 meters. UN compound should be in the following city block."

Kids ran down one of the alleys, playing with each other. They were wearing sky-blue Kevlar helmets with the white UN logo on the side. Bower doubted that was a good sign.

The two vehicles turned into a broad avenue running straight for several miles through the deadpan eastern side of the city. In the distance, colored fabrics billowed out from the rooftops, sweeping down across the road like curtains and broad streamers.

"What the fuck is that?" Elvis asked. "A parachute?"

"Too many colors. A hot-air balloon, perhaps?" Bower added, her mind casting back to the gentle fields of England for a moment.

The fabric had a purple tinge with hints of scarlet, emerald and a golden yellow hue depending on the way sunlight played on the windswept material. Sections ballooned up on the rooftops, catching a breeze that never made it to ground level.

"Too big," Jameson said.

What had initially looked like power-lines crisscrossing the street suddenly resolved into a vast network of tentacles strewn on the rooftops lining the avenue.

"They brought one of those things down," Jameson added, with no need to explain himself further. Bower breathed deeply.

“Fuck,” Elvis said.

Silently, Bower agreed with him.

A burnt-out armored personnel carrier sat to one side, its tires reduced to hardened piles of black rubber. Dark stains marred the dirt, dried blood from bodies long since dragged away, at least she hoped they were remnants of some forgotten conflict. In a couple of places the blood looked fresh. The smell of cordite hung in the air.

A sense of heartache struck Bower. There was a disdain for life in war-torn Africa, where the price of a life was less than the bullets that felled a man.

At the end of the block, a torn UN flag flew above a battle-scarred walled compound. Billows of what she presumed were alien skin flapped in the breeze easily a quarter of a mile beyond.

“Hi Honey, I’m home,” Elvis said in his distinct southern drawl. No one laughed.

“No troops,” Jameson said, leaning forward and looking at the factory walls on one side and the rooftops across the road. “Why no sentries?”

“Look at that fucker,” Elvis replied, pointing at the dead alien creature. “It’s a goddamn scarecrow. Who the hell’s gonna wanna attack them with that Mo-Fo hanging there. God knows what was in its belly.”

Jameson ignored him, grabbing the radio just as the Hummer turned to enter the courtyard. “Hold there, Bosco. Something’s not right.”

“I’ve seen this movie,” Elvis continued. “Fucking face-huggers and acid-spitting aliens. We go in there, we’re screwed. I hate this shit.”

Bower could see Jameson was shutting Elvis out, trying to think on his feet. Jameson wasn’t worried about aliens, he was worried about an all-too-human ambush, and Bower felt it too. The Hummer was half-way through the entrance to the factory courtyard. She watched as the lightly-armored Hummer reversed out, clipping a power pole on the blind side of the vehicle.

“Get us out of here,” Jameson yelled at Elvis.

Elvis was already hitting reverse, twisting his body sideways as he peered at the side mirror. The whine of the engine hit fever pitch as the truck raced backwards in reverse gear.

“Bus,” yelled Elvis, hitting the brakes and twisting hard on the wheel, sending the vehicle sliding to one side. At first, Bower didn’t know what he meant, but then she felt their truck collide with a large vehicle behind them. The jolt passed through her as a wave, rattling her bones. In the wing mirror, she could see a burning bus blocking the road behind them, having been pushed in place by rebels on foot. Their AK-47s were shouldered as they heaved the barricade in place.

Smithy opened up with the SAW mounted on the Hummer. From the angle, Bower could see she was firing on someone on a rooftop to their right. Plastic cartridges danced across the road.

"Go forward. Go forward," Jameson screamed into the radio.

A trail of smoke sailed down the road, skimming past their truck and exploding against the bus behind them. Suddenly, the smell in the air was one of soot, that of burning rubber. The sound of automatic gun fire broke around them like thunder.

The hood of the Hummer exploded in a flash of flames. A fireball arose, but the Hummer raced on, swerving wildly as it passed the entrance to the UN compound. A trail of smoke raced from a darkened window on the first floor, out across the street and down toward the Hummer.

Bower watched in horror as the Hummer lifted off the ground with the force of the explosion. The vehicle flipped onto one side in a blinding flash and skidded to a halt, barring their path.

For a second, Bower thought Elvis was going to ram the Hummer to push it out of the way, but he rode the truck up over the curb and drove half on the sidewalk as Jameson fired his M4 out the open window. Whereas before she'd thought the gunfire was loud, now it was deafening, the shock from each round reverberated through the cabin so much so she couldn't hear what Elvis was saying. He was yelling, of that she was sure, but his words were indistinct, just a blur in the confusion. Smoke trails cut through the air followed by explosions tearing up the sidewalk.

Bower felt the rear of the truck slide out from beneath them before she registered the sound of the explosion and the wave of heat emanating from a rocket blast. The truck skidded through the intersection in front of the UN compound.

Jameson was out of the truck. How he'd moved so fast Bower wasn't sure, but his door was open and she could see him standing there, his legs spread slightly apart on the dusty road, firing short bursts in various directions.

Bower went to move toward him when a hand grabbed the collar of her vest and dragged her backwards out of the cab of the truck. Bower struggled not to fall to the ground, grabbing with her hands to steady herself as she slid out of the door to the street below. Elvis had his M4 cradled so the butt of the rifle sat in the crook of his arm. Like Jameson, he was firing short bursts, just one or two shots in one direction and then another. With his other hand he kept a firm grip on her collar, holding her head down so she couldn't see all that was going on. He was protecting her, she understood that, but with a ruthless amount of force. The stiff panels of her Kevlar vest made it awkward to move, digging into her hips.

Elvis herded her toward the back of the truck where black smoke billowed into the air.

Jameson had come around the front of the truck. She could see him firing one way while Elvis fired the other.

Elvis shoved her down against the back of the burning truck, using what little cover he had. Bower could feel the radiant heat of the flames lashing at her cheeks. Bullets whipped past.

Looking around, dark shapes appeared in the doorways and broken windows of the surrounding buildings. Bower could see the upturned Hummer. Oil and diesel seeped out onto the dusty ground.

Smithy was standing defiant in front of the wreckage, firing the SAW on full automatic at rebel soldiers charging in from further down the street. They dropped like flies. Hot shell casings skidded across the road away from her. Smithy eased up, turning her attention back to the rooftops with short bursts. Her tiny frame shook with the recoil of the bullets streaming out of the smoking barrel of her machine gun. She was fearless. Bower was terrified.

"Get her the fuck out of here," Jameson yelled over the noise and carnage, pointing at Bower.

Bosco was running toward a storefront with a wounded soldier draped over his shoulder. Where was Kowalski? Her heart raced. She could see soldiers still trapped inside the Hummer, but they weren't moving. Blood marred the inside of the shattered windscreen. Smoke billowed from the stricken vehicle. She got up, wanting to run over to the Hummer and help the wounded Rangers.

Elvis caught her by the scruff of the neck, grabbing her kevlar vest and dragging her the other way. He was strong, unbelievably strong. She had no choice in the matter. Dust kicked up in front of them as bullets cut up the street. Elvis jerked her to one side, changing direction and running for the sunlit side of the street. She felt like a rag-doll blown about in a storm.

Bower found herself slammed up against the wall next to a burnt-out car outside the abandoned UN compound. The rest of the soldiers were on the far side of the intersection.

A rocket-propelled grenade slammed into the cab of the truck, tearing the metal to shreds in a blinding flash. Flames leaped into the air. Although Bower was thirty feet away, the concussion wave shook her body.

Blood dripped from her lip.

Elvis was saying something to her, but whether it was the shock or the ringing in her ears, she couldn't hear him. She could see his lips moving but his words sounded distant.

They hunkered down behind the burnt-out car as bullets cut through the air around them.

Bower forced herself to hear, willing herself to amplify the sound of his voice. Elvis still had his gold-rimmed dark sunglasses on. His hair was still slicked back. The smile on his lips seemed surreal. Even his uniform seemed clean. Whereas all around her dirt and dust and grim marred the world, Elvis looked pristine.

"Don't you worry about a thing, Miss. We'll get you out of here."

She couldn't believe him. In the midst of the sporadic gunfire and the tinny sound of bullets striking the metal frame of the car they were hiding behind, he was grinning like a child. He leaned over the rusted hood of the car and returned fire at the growing number of rebel soldiers pouring into the area.

Bower slumped down behind the car, her back pressing against the rusted metal door. Her chest hurt, but she wasn't sure why. Perhaps it was the exhaustion of breathing at an anaerobic rate, perhaps it was the adrenalin wearing off. Her hand ran over the breastplate on her bulletproof vest, her fingers lingered in two tiny holes, barely big enough for her fingertips to reach within. The crumpled remains of two bullets were still hot to touch.

Tears ran down her cheeks. A wave of anguish swept over her. Why? Why her? How could man be so cruel to himself? How could such anger and hatred be directed at her when all she'd ever wanted to do was to help people. And it was impersonal. Their assailants knew nothing about them, nothing other than the flag under which they sheltered. They knew nothing except their own blind ideological hatred, and that was something she couldn't fathom.

Bosco scared the hell out of her. He came sliding in beside her, having crossed between the overturned Hummer and the burning wreckage of the truck.

"It's about fucking time," Elvis said, grinning at his friend.

"Someone's got to bail your ass out, pretty boy," Bosco replied.

"What's the plan?" Elvis asked, peering out over the hood of the car for a moment before dropping back behind cover.

"Sarge doesn't want to risk the Doc in the open. We break left, try to find some clear air. He's going to provide covering fire before breaking right. Smithy found a stash of RPGs in that storefront so they're going to give these bastards a taste of their own medicine. Plan is we meet back at the markets."

"Who?" Bower asked. She couldn't bring herself to say any more.

From the look in his eyes, Bower already knew what Bosco was going to say. "We're three down. Two Rangers and a civilian."

Bower swallowed the lump in her throat.

Again, there was that sense of clinical detachment in the Ranger's military speak, although Bower realized Bosco's comment was as much for Elvis as for her, as Bosco didn't name the soldiers that had

died.

"I'm sorry," he added, his eyes unable to hold hers as he spoke. "He didn't feel anything."

Those words, they were lies and she knew it. The cold detachment with which Bosco dealt with death was all too familiar. She'd seen it before, the facile comfort of an apparently quick death. No one dies instantly. As a doctor, Bower understood that all too well. And yet as the moment passed and the light faded, there was nothing but shallow comfort to be gained from tragedy. Sorry never meant anything to the dead, and for the living it was misplaced but somehow well meaning. Kowalski didn't feel anything; it was a statement no one could ever verify. Well, he won't feel anything anymore, she thought, keeping that to herself.

In the blistering heat of the day, Bower felt sick. Bile washed up the back of her throat. She looked back at the Hummer, but she couldn't see any movement within the darkened, shattered windscreen. How did Bosco know Kowalski was dead? Maybe he was badly injured. Maybe she could still save him. Maybe, but Bosco had clearly seen enough of death to understand the limits of life. Would he lie to her? Would he soften the truth so as to avoid her being reckless?

Bower tensed her muscles, readying herself to spring out into the maelstrom of fire and dart over to the Hummer when a rocket-propelled grenade soared above them, striking the wall less than ten meters away. A wave of heat washed over her. Fragments of rock and stone rained down on her, leaving her wondering how long it would be before she joined Kowalski in the cold, dark silence.

Bosco scrambled out from behind the cover of the rusted car and over to the sharp, stone wall dominating the street corner. He had his back to her, marching forward with the barrel of his M4 leading the way, the rifle pressed hard into his shoulder. He fired a couple of rounds, seemingly oblivious to the gunfire behind him. From the other corner, Jameson and his soldiers opened up, laying down suppressing fire.

"Time to go," Elvis said, grabbing Bower by the collar.

"No."

Bower couldn't move, but she could pull against Elvis. She was safe here, she thought, the rebels couldn't shoot her behind the car. In reality, the high-velocity rounds raining down upon them punched holes clear through the wreckage. Her only measure of safety came in not being seen.

Elvis dragged her to her feet, his fingers locked around the collar of her Kevlar vest.

"Let me go. You have no right."

"We'll debate freewill in combat situations later, Doc. For now,

we have to move or we're dead."

Bullets whistle by her head. Her feet stumbled across the rubble on the ground.

Bosco crossed the road. His eyes never left the gunsight on his M4. He was leaning forward, moving at a light jog, his rifle pointing down the street as he fired.

"We've got snipers at two o'clock," Elvis yelled at Bosco. "Launchers on the rooftops."

Bosco was focused on one thing, getting clear of the intersection. Without taking his eyes from the scope on his M4 he dropped out an empty magazine and slammed another in place.

Jameson and his team were firing off rocket launchers of their own.

Smithy had abandoned her SAW and was using a regular M4, firing short bursts at someone in the building ahead of them. Whereas the other soldiers were behind cover, Smithy seemed to be oblivious to the concept of self-preservation. She stayed on the move, her combat boots kicking up dust as she ran in short bursts away from the intersection, moving in the opposite direction to Elvis and Bosco. Smithy was constantly turning to identify another threat. Jameson had a soldier draped over his shoulder, running hard after her as the other soldiers followed, darting between storefronts.

Elvis dragged Bower across the road behind Bosco. It wasn't that Bower was resisting Elvis, she simply couldn't keep up with his pace. Her feet felt like lead. Her legs were clumsy, flaying as she ran.

The intersection was covered by rebels on the flat rooftops. Bower could see one of the rebels opposite Jameson lining her and Elvis up with a rocket launcher mounted over his shoulder.

"Won't feel anything," she mumbled under her breath. "We won't feel a thing."

There was no comfort in that thought, but it was all she could hold to in the moment.

Elvis must have seen the rebel as well as he quickened his pace and threw Bower against the wall on the far side of the intersection. He threw his right arm across her chest, flattening her against the crumbling brickwork just as the RPG struck the corner.

Bower never heard the blast.

The sudden compression of air shook her frame and she found her ears ringing with an eerie high-pitched whine. Clouds of dust enveloped her. She was confused, disoriented. Her ears rang but there was silence at all other frequencies as though someone had pulled the plug on the stereo.

Dirt, dust, rocks and bricks billowed across the street, hurled outward by the explosion. Elvis staggered forward away from what

was left of the crumbling wall. She'd felt the blast travel through the air, through the wall, even through him as his arm held her prone against the bricks. Elvis faltered, his boots catching on the debris in the road. His glasses were gone. His helmet had been blown off his head. Blood marred his face and neck.

He staggered forward oblivious to all around him. Bullets kicked up the dust around his feet. Elvis fell to his knees. His back was straight but his head was bowed as though he were kneeling in prayer. It was only then Bower noticed the dismembered, bloodied arm lying some fifteen feet away in the middle of the road. Splatters of blood marred the ground, turning the dust black rather than crimson.

Bower felt a hand on her shoulder.

"We've got to go."

Bosco's words were muted even though he was shouting, just a vague semblance of sound slowly leaking back into her silent world.

"Nooooo."

"There's nothing you can do for him," Bosco cried above the crackle of battle. "If you die then his death has been in vain."

Bower looked at Bosco through tear-stained eyes. She was already pulling the belt from her waist. The sound of explosions, bullets flying and men screaming rose in a crescendo, but none of that mattered. She couldn't leave Elvis.

"He's not dead," she cried aloud.

Bower pulled away from Bosco, surprising herself with the vigor of her own movement.

Bower shut out her own fears and changed gears mentally, moving into overdrive. She grabbed Elvis by the shoulder and wrapped her belt around the shattered remains of his upper arm, pulling it tight and stemming the flow of blood. The blast had left his bicep in tatters, with the ruddy white humerus bone protruding to just above where the elbow should have been. By strapping her belt across his deltoid, leading from his shoulder, she hoped to contain the arterial bleeding.

"Fuck, fuck, fuck," Bosco cried. He was manic, she could see that by the way he was moving. He fired erratically, turning rapidly one way and then the other. He dropped an empty magazine out of his M4 and slid another in seamlessly. "What a way to fucking die. Jesus, Mary and Joseph, this is a complete clusterfuck."

Bower ignored him. She slapped Elvis on the side of his face, staring deep into his eyes as she spoke.

"Elvis, look at me. Come on, I need you to be here, now. Look at me. Remember me, Doctor Elizabeth Bower. You're in Malawi. You're in a fire-fight. I need you to focus. I need you to come with me. Do you understand?"

The distant glassy look in his eyes gave way to a lethargic nod. Bower helped the big man to his feet, struggling to support his weight. Two sharp stabs of pain cut into her back and she knew she'd been hit. Her bulletproof vest took the brunt of the impact, but the pain surging through her back felt as though she'd been struck by a baseball bat. Bower staggered, almost dropping Elvis.

"We're fucked," Bosco cried. "We are so fucked."

Looking around, Bower could see Jameson and his team were gone. She remembered how he'd described the different sounds of gunfire back in the village, the violent snap of the M4 compared to the throaty thump of the rebel AK-47s. There was only one M4 firing, Bosco's.

Bosco had moved behind the cover of a storefront further down the road, moving as though he could will Bower and Elvis to move faster. Elvis was heavy. Although there was nothing wrong with his legs he was leaning heavily upon her, making it hard for her to push on.

To her surprise, the AK-47s stopped shooting, and for a moment she held out hope they'd escaped, but mentally she knew they were barely twenty feet from the intersection. Something else had happened, but what? The lonely crack of the M4 continued, but something was wrong.

Looking up from beneath the weight of Elvis bearing down on her, Bower watched as Bosco was hit first in the leg and then the arm by two precise shots. He staggered forward but couldn't bring his M4 to bear.

Ahead, a crowd of African rebels ran in toward them yelling and screaming, but they weren't shooting, they wanted to take them alive. They reached Bosco and began clubbing him with the butt of their AK-47s. They knocked Elvis to the ground as well, but they left Bower standing there covered in his blood.

Bower watched in horror as one of the rebels slipped a black sack over Bosco's head, pulling a drawstring tight around his throat. She cried out as her hands were pulled behind her back and bound tightly together with rope. Her world went black as coarse sacking was jerked over her head. The pull-rope around her throat restricted her breathing, causing her to panic. Bower was pushed forward and fell awkwardly to the ground, unable to break her fall with her arms.

They want us alive, was all she could think as the butt of a rifle struck her head and she fell unconscious.

# Chapter 09: Colosseum

"Wake up," a gruff voice demanded. The steel cap of a boot kicked at Bower's arm as she lay on the rough concrete floor.

Bower was groggy. Her eyes struggled to focus. The back of her head throbbed. Her hands were unbound so she reached up, gingerly touching the bloodied, matted hair on her head. A severe bruise and the sunlight streaming in at a low angle told her several hours had passed. Slowly, she sat up, her back pressed against a brick wall.

Bower looked around, expecting to be in a prison cell, but they were on the upper floor of an abandoned factory. The rooftops of the surrounding buildings were either at the same height or one story higher. Broken skylights dotted the ceiling some twenty feet above. A section of the roof had collapsed further along within the vast, desolate factory. Bower could see a gaping hole in the floor directly below the shattered roof. Whether the damage was caused by an artillery shell or a bomb dropped from an airplane, she didn't know, but reinforced steel bars protruded from the shattered concrete. Whatever caused the damage, it had happened long ago. Rather than a factory, this must have been a warehouse, a staging area, because she couldn't see any manufacturing equipment.

Elvis was leaning up against the wall beside her. His head hung low, but he was conscious. He must have been in an excruciating amount of pain, but he didn't show it. He was mumbling under his breath. Fluids oozed from the bloody stump that had once been his arm. His head rolled softly to one side and Bower doubted his state of consciousness was anything that could be described as coherent. The physical and mental shock he had suffered would have killed most men. Beyond him, Bosco sat with his legs sprawled out in front of him. A bandage had been wrapped around one of his legs, stemming the flow of blood from a bullet wound. From the rushed, careless manner in which it was bound she figured he'd tended to his own injuries using his combat trauma kit.

Rebel soldiers gathered around.

"I am General Alad Humar Adan. You are terrorists, mercenaries, taken into custody by the People's Liberation Army of Malawi."

The general, if he really was a general, looked to be no more than twenty years old, although it was never easy to tell the age of an African. He was thin and tall. His dark skin glistened with natural oils, while his curly hair was shaved on the sides, rising a few inches above his head, accentuating his height.

He was smiling, gloating. There were at least fifty other rebels milling around. Some of them had their AK-47s shouldered, others

held their rifles casually, waving them about as though they were toys as they joked with each other. They were smoking, but Bower doubted they were smoking tobacco. There was a glazed look in their bloodshot eyes.

"Do you not know me?" the general demanded, putting on a theatrical pretense at their lack of acknowledgement. "To you I am Will Smith, and this is my Independence Day."

The soldiers behind him laughed.

"You see, I have done more than your Hollywood actors ever could. For me, this alien invasion is no fantasy, no movie full of special effects. I have faced the demon and defeated him. I have brought down the alien. He has bowed before my feet. Soon, all nations will come to me to learn how to defeat this alien terror."

Adan strutted before them. His accent was clipped, betraying his local pedigree.

"To you, I am a hero. I am Laurence Fishburne. I am Denzel Washington. To you, I am Samuel L. Jackson, and do not forget the L, it is very important: L is for Leroy. You see, I am Jamie Foxx. I am all your heroes rolled into one."

Adan marched back and forth with a small white cane hooked under his arm. He was wearing riding boots, like those Bower had once worn when conducting dressage in England, only her boots had been scuffed and worn. Adan's knee-height boots were polished with a brilliant black shine. The medals on his chest looked like they were made from plastic, not that she was going to point that out.

"I am Caesar. I am Alexander the Great. I am Napoleon. I have defeated the United Nations. I have defeated the United States. And now I have defeated monsters from another world. I am invincible."

Bower averted her gaze, looking down at his boots as he turned before her.

"What are you looking at?" Adan snapped.

She looked up.

Adan was facing Bosco.

"What the fuck are you looking at?" Adan demanded, pulling the white cane from under his arm and pointing it at Bosco. It was a riding whip.

Adan flicked the whip through the air.

In that instant, Bower could see the flex in the whip. From her short stint assisting vets as a teen, Bower knew the kind of injury riding whips could cause a horse. In the wrong hands, they were instruments of cruelty. On the soft skin of someone's face they were criminal.

Blood sprayed across the wall as Bosco's head reeled to one side.

"I asked you what you were looking at," Adan demanded.

Bower tried to make herself as small as possible, with her head bowed and her shoulders hunched. She could hear Bosco choking on blood.

"You think you can disrespect me?" Adan cried. "You think you Americans can come here and kill our people with impunity? You think you can get away with these crimes? You murder our women. You kill our children.

"Ah, but you no longer hold a gun. No longer can you bully us, push us around. Now, we hold the guns."

Adan turned back to his troops, holding his hands out wide as he spoke to them.

"You see, there is no land of the free. There is no land of the brave. The only bravery these men know is when they are holding a gun. They are cowards. The only justice they know is the justice that comes out of the end of a barrel. But there is no justice in Africa, there is just us."

He laughed cruelly, turning back to Bosco.

Adan used his riding whip to raise Bosco's chin.

"And we will have our justice. You will pay for what you have done to our land. You will pay with your blood for what you have done to our women and children. You will—"

"Stop," Bower cried, knowing it was a mistake as the word left her mouth. She couldn't help herself. She had to say something.

"And what have we here?" Adan asked, his theatrical anger subsiding for a moment.

"I am Doctor Elizabeth Jane Bower, with Médecins Sans Frontières. These soldiers were escorting me to the UN compound when we were ambushed."

Adan crouched down in front of her, moving her face around with his bloodied whip.

"Look at you. Look at your skin," he began. "Why do you side with the white-devils? Why do you turn your back on your own people?"

Bower didn't want to reply. She knew that would play into his hands, but she couldn't help herself.

"You asshole."

Adan laughed, "Is it only your women that can speak? Are you not men who can speak for yourselves? Has the US Army been castrated?"

The African rebel soldiers laughed at the Rangers.

"Leave her alone," Bosco said, and Adan wheeled to face him again.

"So we have an American hero here after all. Who are you? Are you Bruce Willis or Sylvester Stallone? Or are you an old-fashioned

hero? From the days when everything was black and white? Are you John Wayne, or are you Ronald Ray-Gun?"

Again, the soldiers laughed on cue.

"Get them up."

Soldiers grabbed them, pulling them to their feet and gripping them by the arms and shoulders. On the periphery of her vision, Bower could see Elvis grimacing as he was pushed forward. He staggered, his feet barely able to carry his weight, his boots dragging on the ground.

Adan led them over to the edge of the gaping hole in the concrete floor. Chunks of concrete hung from reinforced steel bars around the shattered edge of the dark hole. Below them, on the ground floor, Bower could see a series of double bed mattresses piled up haphazardly on top of each other.

"This is the colosseum," Adan proclaimed as Bower, Bosco and Elvis were pushed toward the edge.

The rebels were excited. They were talking rapidly with each other as they spread out around the edge of the broad hole.

Bower didn't understand what was happening. Adan must have guessed at her confusion, as he added, "They are taking bets on how long you will last. So far, no one has survived more than five minutes against the beast."

Looking down into the devastated lower floor, Bower could see dark stains on the concrete. Blood splatter marred the mattresses. Some of the blood was dry, but one patch looked wet as it still had a slick sheen.

"You, who are condemned to death, you will fight this day for your lives. As Caesar, I hold the power of life and death in my hand. You gladiators, you will fight, and if you win, I will grant you your freedom."

Elvis staggered and almost fell forward into the hole. Bower grabbed at him, putting his good arm over her shoulder.

Bower still didn't understand what Adan was asking of them, were they to fight each other to the death? They simply wouldn't fight. She wouldn't, Elvis couldn't, and she doubted Bosco would buy into Adan's madness.

"Where are you my beauty?" Adan called out. "Where is my lion? My tiger?"

One of the soldiers struck out with the butt of his gun, striking at a loose clump of concrete dangling from a reinforced steel rod running through the crumbling remains of the floor. A whip lashed out from the darkness below, cracking in the air just inches below the butt of the rifle. The motion was smooth, surprisingly quick.

"What the fuck?" Bosco cried.

Several more blood-red, whip-like tentacles struck out trying to reach the edge of the crumbling floor.

"Ha ha ha," Adan yelled, his voice again theatrical, although he needed not inflate their sense of fear, the creature below already terrified Bower. From the shadows, there was a rumbling, seething sound, like rolling storm clouds before thunder breaks overhead.

"You see. You are not the first to be caught by the great General Alad Humar Adan."

Bower's legs shook. Bosco looked pale. Elvis groaned, mumbling, "No, no."

Troops jostled for the best positions around the hole, looking into it from all angles. They pointed and called, crying out with glee and yelling with excitement. Money was changing hands in fistfuls as several impromptu bookies moved among the troops, collecting loose notes in a helmet.

"But I am magnanimous," Adan announced, handing his riding whip to one of the soldiers standing next to him. Bower got the feeling the general had given this speech several times before. "I will not send a man to his death unarmed. No, that would not do for sport. I am fair. I am just."

Adan pulled a revolver from a holster on his hip. He flipped the gun to one side, opening the cylinder block, exposing six chambers.

"Do you see this?" he asked, emptying the bullets into his hand. "This is a 44 Magnum, the most powerful handgun in the world. This handgun could blow your head clean off your shoulders. So, you've got to ask yourself one question. 'Do I feel lucky?' Well, do ya, punk?"

Adan made like he was going to hand the empty gun to Bosco but then tossed it carelessly into the gaping hole. The gun clattered across the concrete, coming to a rest in a pool of fresh blood.

The soldiers roared with laughter.

"I give you a chance, a fair chance. If you can kill the beast, you go free."

Adan held up a single bullet. He dropped the bullet in Bosco's outstretched hand as the rebels cheered. Bower could see Bosco weighing the bullet, tossing it slightly in his hand.

"No," Elvis cried, pushing down on Bower's shoulder as he straightened up to face Adan. "This is madness."

Bosco touched him gently on his good shoulder.

"Don't worry, big guy," he said, smiling as he clutched the bullet. "I'll see you in hell."

One of the soldiers moved up to Bosco, nudging him with his AK-47. Bower could see Bosco thinking, lining up the soldiers training their rifles on him from either side. He was out of options. It was jump or be pushed.

Bosco had no choice. He turned, facing Bower briefly, and winked as he launched himself out across the hole in the floor. Leaping out as far as he could, Bosco fell heavily on the mattresses some twenty feet below, catching them on one side and rolling onto the concrete floor.

Bower was horrified. She watched as Bosco got to his feet. He limped to where the gun lay. Beneath her, the alien creature screamed like a wild animal, thrashing and striking at the concrete. Although she couldn't see the creature's body, she could see dark red tentacles moving through the shadows on the edge of the dim light shining into the darkened first floor. The rebels yelled, chanting something in their native tongue.

Bosco had the gun. She could see him loading the pistol, slipping his one bullet into an empty chamber and moving it in place. He cocked the gun and pointed it into the shadows.

He looked calm.

Bower was shaking. She could feel her left leg lifting off the ground as it shook within her boot. An intense sense of fear gripped her mind as the worst of nightmares unfolded before her.

Bosco backed away from the darkness, staying in what little natural light fell through from the upper floor. He was near the mattresses. He spun one way, then another, pointing the gun out straight before him. Bower couldn't hear the monster over the noise of the rebel troops yelling, but Bosco seemed to be turning based on sound, spinning one way then the other as he hobbled on his wounded leg. For the creature to move that quick must mean it could cover a hundred yards in just seconds, far faster than a man or land animal on Earth.

Bosco pointed his gun down, as though he were aiming at something low to the ground on the other side of the mattresses, and then spun around with the gun thrust out at chest height.

The creature was stalking him, looking for an opening. Like a lion moving through long grass, or a shark circling in murky waters, the alien appeared to be weighing up its options, using the shattered crates and concrete supports for cover as it lurked in the darkness. From what she could see, the monster was trying to disorient Bosco, trying to confuse him.

The alien creature reared up before Bosco in the shadows. Bower couldn't make out what he was seeing, but he was pointing the gun up at something several feet higher than himself. His feet stumbled on some loose wood as he backed up. Bosco was yelling something to her and Elvis, but she couldn't hear what he was saying.

Bower saw the shot before she heard it.

The revolver lashed backwards as a flash appeared at the muzzle, then the crack of gunfire echoed throughout the empty factory.

As the gun recoiled, the creature struck.

Hundreds of tentacles lashed out at Bosco, engulfing him, slashing at his clothing and tearing him apart. His body was flung around like a rag-doll. Whips flayed his skin, breaking his bones and shredding his torso. His Kevlar vest was sliced in pieces, while his boots were torn in half, still holding the crushed remains of his feet. Within seconds, there was nothing but bloody gristle where once a man had stood. A dismembered hand lay to one side grasping the revolver.

Bower struggled not to vomit.

The rebel soldiers cheered.

"Two minutes ten," someone yelled out, and another roar arose from the soldiers.

Bower found herself deeply moved by the sudden violence with which Bosco had died. Was that all life amounted to? She barely knew Bosco, but she knew there had to be so much more to his life. She couldn't switch off. Although she'd been surrounded by an appalling, senseless loss of life since the attack on the Humvee, she couldn't ignore what had happened to him. Bosco wasn't a statistic. Just moments before, he'd been a living, breathing human being, and the stark finality of his sudden, violent death got to her.

Bosco had parents, everyone did, but she wondered how well he got on with them? He probably had brothers and sisters. Were they older or younger? Had they gone into the army as well? Or had they escaped this fate, becoming accountants or nurses, mechanics or shopkeepers. He'd grown up somewhere, bouncing on the knee of a proud grandparent. He'd attended school, probably fallen in love a couple of times, and one fateful day, Bosco had decided to join the army. What had that day been like? Had the sun shone, or was the day grey, with moody clouds passing overhead?

What had drawn Bosco to army life? Was it a sense of adventure, to escape the mundane routines of life? Had it been because his father or his mother, or perhaps an uncle had served with distinction? Had it been for patriotism or pay? And all those he'd met along the way, all those he'd befriended with his wit, what would they ever hear of this? Would they ever learn what happened? Or just that he was MIA: missing in action, presumed dead? Would they ever hear of his courage under fire? How much heartache would news of his death bring?

Bower felt an ache in her chest.

It wasn't right that life could be snuffed out like a candle.

Tears ran down her cheeks.

"You are next," Adan said, looking at Elvis.

"No," Bower cried. "This is wrong. You can't do this."

Adan laughed. "Oh, but I can."

He held two bullets in his hand, between his thumb and his forefinger, holding them up high so the soldiers could see what he was proposing.

Adan yelled, “What do I hear for a double? How long can two of them last? Do I hear four minutes? Is anyone going to take four minutes for the two of them? Do I hear four? Five?”

The rebels cheered and called out in response as the gambling began in earnest, with money rapidly changing hands.

“You sick bastard,” Elvis said, struggling to hold himself upright. Bower could feel him trembling. Even with his shattered arm, lost below the elbow, his bulk made him look formidable, especially as his bulletproof vest stuck out from his chest. His gruff voice sounded resolved, but Bower knew he was as afraid as she was, she could feel adrenalin betraying him. They were going to die.

Adan held out the bullets for Elvis to take, but with a tourniquet around his torn bicep and his other arm slung over Bower’s shoulder, he couldn’t hold them. Bower held out her hand, but Adan played up the incident.

“Arnold Schwarzenegger was so tough he didn’t need bullets to kill the predator. Are you our Arnold? Can you kill this monster with your bare hands?”

The soldiers laughed and jeered at them.

“Should you change your mind,” Adan continued, facing Elvis and Bower. “You will have to find your bullets.”

Adan tossed the two bullets carelessly out over the vast hole in the floor. Bower watched as the bullets sailed downward, bouncing on the mattresses, one falling to the left, the other bouncing further on and somewhere to the right.

“Fuck,” Elvis said under his breath.

Bower felt the butt of a rifle thrust hard into her back, forcing her to stumble forward toward the jagged hole in the floor. Below her, the alien monster seethed with anger, lashing out with its razor-sharp tentacles.

“No,” she screamed. “This is not fair.”

“Fair?” Adan cried in reply. “Fair? You bomb us with your Raptors, you occupy our country, you force your systems and beliefs upon us, you destroy our traditions, and you want to talk to me about fair? Ha. I say, you have as much chance down there as we do against your troops.”

Another shove in the back brought her to the edge of the abyss.

Concrete crumbled beneath her boots.

Elvis jumped out before her, clearing the torn strands of reinforced steel bars protruding from the shattered concrete. He landed on a mattress, rolling on his good shoulder as he fell forward.

Bower jumped. She had to. If she'd been shoved, she knew she would have fallen awkwardly and missed the mattresses. Breaking a leg on the concrete floor didn't seem like such a smart idea, so she jumped. Jumping was her only option, and yet it felt like suicide.

Bower didn't make it as far as Elvis had, and she had no idea about rolling to soften the blow. She landed on a single mattress off to one side, and was shocked to feel the jarring impact resound up through her ankles, knees, hips and spine. She collapsed in a heap, pain tearing through her body.

Elvis staggered up against the crushed remains of a wooden crate, using it to help him stand. Bower got to her feet, but her ankles ached, the soles of her feet felt like someone had been pounding on them with a sledgehammer.

"Bullets," Elvis cried. "Get the bullets."

Bower looked around.

From the ground, the layout looked entirely different. She swung around, looking at the pile of mattresses, trying to get her bearings. Above her, the soldiers roared with excitement. She could see Adan standing there, laughing, gloating. From his position, she was able to orient herself. She had to be within a few feet of the bullet that fell to the left.

Elvis staggered over to where the revolver lay in a pool of fresh blood, crushed bone and shredded body tissue. She could see he was in excruciating pain. His movements were coarse. His shattered arm hung by his side, nothing more than a bloody mess.

Instinctively, Bower ran her hands through her short, dark hair. She wasn't sure why, but it helped her think as her eyes scanned the ground, looking for the bullet. Small rocks and splinters of wood lay scattered on the floor. Patches of blood marred the ground.

Her eyes darted back and forth, manic in their desire to find the bullet. Long streaks of blood and splatter patterns stained the support pillars.

Something moved in the shadows. Thousands of blades seemed to slash at the air, cutting through the darkness.

Bower looked up. Her heart raced. She couldn't help herself. Although she knew she should keep looking for the bullet she had to see it, she had to see this alien creature from another world. There, in the darkness, she saw the faint outline of the monster, just a glimpse of spikes and tentacles as the creature moved along the far wall. Above her, the rebels were chanting, willing the creature to attack.

Elvis was on his knees, using his one good hand to pull himself on. He grabbed the gun and leaned up against a concrete support pillar. The physical toll of his injuries had sapped his strength. She could see him struggling, fighting against fatigue and shock. His

gloved fingers gripped the revolver. He wiped the gun against his clothing, trying to clean it.

"Doc, I need those bullets," he yelled again.

Bower was down on her hands and knees. She was sure this was where she'd seen one of the bullets come to rest. Her hands pushed through the debris, her fingers desperately wanting to clutch at metal and not wood or stone.

The alien roared. Within the darkened floor, there was a sound like the rush of a storm in a forest. Out of the corner of her eye, she could see the monster closing in on Elvis.

"Where's that goddamn bullet?" Elvis cried. He pointed the gun into the shadows, bluffing.

Bower moved to where she'd landed, searching frantically for the first bullet. The mattress she had fallen on had slipped off the pile and lay to one side. She was almost directly below Adan. She couldn't see the general, but she could hear him gloating and calling out with delight.

"Get me that FUCKING bullet," Elvis scream.

Elvis staggered. His legs could no longer carry him. He fell awkwardly, crying out in pain as he sprawled on the concrete.

Bower was manic, searching on her hands and knees for the bullet.

Above them, the rebel soldiers laughed.

Elvis rolled on his back, pushing frantically away from the alien creature as it slowly advanced on him. His boots slipped in the blood of his fallen comrade.

Adan and his troops cheered for the alien.

The creature reared up above Elvis, its tentacles slashing at the air. As the alien moved into the light, Bower got her first good look at the monster. Mentally, she struggled to process what she was seeing. Rather than a single creature, such as a lion or a tiger, the alien appeared to be a chimera, a hybrid, a combination of various creatures melded together.

What she'd thought of as tentacles were flexible blades. Bower was tempted to think of the alien as a giant sea urchin or a western tumbleweed, with an inner core like that of a basketball. Spikes protruded in all directions, but the heart of the creature was a seething mass, constantly moving, rippling and changing shape. She couldn't articulate why, but the two concepts didn't mesh, they seemed incongruous.

Rigid spikes rested on the ground like pikes or poles or crutches, while the upper spikes flexed like whips, giving the top half of the creature the appearance of an octopus thrashing around with its tentacles. As the alien moved, these soft, flexible fore-limbs became

stiff, changing their function from what had presumably been like that of human arms to stiff legs. As the creature rocked forward, the dark, seething mass at the heart of the alien compensated for the motion, swarming and staying still relative to the rotation of the legs.

"BULLETS," Elvis yelled again. "I need those fucking bullets now."

Elvis struck out with his legs, trying to push himself along the ground away from the alien.

Bower couldn't take her eyes off the creature. She was terrified. Her hands continued to run over the debris on the floor, but she never looked down. Then, under the fingers of her left hand, she felt the smooth cylindrical shape of a cartridge. Her fingers picked up the shell and felt for the bullet at its tip to ensure this was not an empty brass case.

"I've got it," she proclaimed, as though merely finding the bullet had solved their problems.

Elvis backed up next to her, sweat dripping from his brow.

The creature seemed wary of leaving the cover of darkness. Could it be that the alien was light-sensitive? Probably not, she figured. More than likely, its behavior was to avoid the rebels taking pot-shots.

With one hand, Elvis opened the revolver, pushing on the main cylinder so it swiveled out to one side of the Magnum. Elvis pushed the ejection rod against his knee, knocking the spent brass casing out of the gun.

His hand was shaking. He held the revolver so Bower could feed the lone bullet into one of the empty chambers within the cylinder block, but she struggled to get the bullet into the revolver. Although it only took fractions of a second, she felt like she was fumbling for upwards of a minute.

Elvis had his back up against one of the mattresses. His head rolled lazily to one side as he flicked the chamber back into the Magnum. He rested the gun on his chest and moved the cylinder so the bullet was in place, ready to fire. Bower hadn't thought about it, but it was only then she realized she should have placed the bullet in the upper chamber. She was horrified to think she'd slowed the whole process.

While they were preoccupied, the monster retreated into the shadows, apparently sensing the gun was now loaded. Bower could see the alien understood the danger represented by this weapon, even with only a single bullet.

"Three minutes," one of the rebels yelled out above her. Although to Bower it felt like three hours. Sweat dripped from her forehead, running down her neck. Her hands were shaking, but she knew what she had to do.

Bower scrambled up the pile of mattresses as Elvis called out, “Find the other bullet.”

She was already on it.

From the spongy mattress top, Bower could see the creature moving around behind Elvis, forcing him to turn. Elvis had no strength left; she could see that. He struggled to turn himself, putting the revolver down and pulling with his one good hand as his boots slipped on the bloodied concrete. He was exhausted. He couldn’t turn to face the alien.

Above them, General Adan laughed and cried out with glee, enjoying the spectacle. The creature was almost directly below the general, but he was safe, well back from the edge, with just his upper torso visible from the ground floor.

Bower pulled herself away from staring at the creature, her eyes scanned the floor for the second bullet. It was impossible. There was too much debris. She could see several spent shell casings, any one of them could have been the second bullet, but from where she was, she couldn’t tell for sure. She went to jump down the other side of the mattresses and start searching, but she was aware the creature was moving in to kill Elvis. She couldn’t leave him. She couldn’t abandon him when he was helpless.

For his part, Elvis had rolled over onto his stomach. He had both arms out in front of him, even though one had been torn off and was little more than a bloody stump. He was trying to bring the gun to bear on this creature from another world.

This was wrong, so wrong. Ever since the aliens had arrived, Bower had visions of a peaceful encounter, a sharing of knowledge and of culture, of art and music. How had mankind’s first encounter with another intelligent sentient being come to enmity and warfare? Intelligence should be about caring, not fighting. Reason should rule, not base survival instincts. Her heart sank at the bitter reality that faced her.

Bower slid down the mattresses, landing by Elvis.

The gun was shaking so violently in his hand he couldn’t have hit the side of a barn.

Bower pulled the gun from his feeble fingers and his arm collapsed, falling to the concrete.

The hammer on the Magnum was cocked, ready to fire.

Bower had one shot. She had to make it count, but how? She had no idea how many people Adan had sentenced to death in his so-called colosseum, but that none of them had stood a chance against this monster was plain to see.

The alien braced itself, drawing its tentacles in, protecting its central core. Although Bower hadn’t seen what the creature had done

to protect itself when Bosco fired, she had seen what happened next. One bullet wouldn't make a difference. She knew what to expect. Her hand trembled, shaking as she tried to gain some composure. Sweat dripped from her forehead, stinging her eyes. Her fingers shook. The gun felt so heavy, as though it had a will of its own and wanted to fall back to the floor.

Adan was laughing. His white teeth glistened in the low light.

Bower raised the gun.

Gripping the stock with both hands, she breathed deeply, calming her nerves. Her index finger squeezed the trigger. The sudden crack surprised her, while the recoil from the Magnum threw her hands up over her head and she lost her grip on the revolver. The gun clattered across the concrete somewhere behind her.

Whip-like tentacles lashed out before her, a blaze of deep-red knives slashing through the air.

Bower sank to her knees, grimacing, waiting for the inevitable.

Above them, Adan reeled to one side, having been struck by the bullet in the chest. Bower caught sight of blood spraying through the air as he fell from sight.

She closed her eyes, not wanting to see what happened next. Although she could hear voices calling to each other on the upper floor, the yelling and cheering of the rebels had stopped. Those voices she could hear sounded muted and distant. Silence followed her thunderclap of violence.

She couldn't kill the alien creature and she knew it, but then she didn't want to kill something from another world. Perhaps it was misplaced idealism, but she wanted to think that two intelligent species from different parts of the universe could meet as intellectual equals, regardless of their technology and background. And perhaps, just perhaps, she would have her revenge on Adan for murdering Bosco.

She'd struck Adan in the chest, of that she was sure, but quite where was difficult to tell. She had to have caught one of the lungs, but she doubted whether she had hit his heart. If anything, she was surprised she'd hit him at all. Would he have a medical team skilled enough to save him from such major trauma to the torso? She doubted that.

Bower could hear the alien moving toward her. She grimaced, keeping her eyelids pressed shut, not wanting to watch the horror unfold. Loose stones and debris crunched under the creature's tentacles as it edged forward. Bower huddled, making herself as small as possible. Warm tentacles ran over her face, through her hair, across her shoulders and down her body. She was shaking violently with fear, resigned to her fate, but slowly, the alien withdrew, leaving her

kneeling in a puddle of her own urine.

After what seemed like an age, Bower opened her eyes. The alien was gone. She looked up at the shattered concrete lining the hole above. No one was there.

Elvis was unconscious.

Bower felt alone, and yet something watched her from the shadows.

# Chapter 10: Water

Night fell. Dark shadows crept across the floor. Moonlight shone through the gaping hole in the roof above the shattered upper floor.

Bower hadn't heard anyone walking around or talking since the shooting, at least no one human. The alien creature moved around sporadically, but seemed to be giving her a wide berth, and that was fine with her.

Elvis gave her something to focus on. He hadn't regained consciousness, and she was worried about him. There was no way of knowing just how much blood he'd lost. The shock of a major amputation would have killed most people, but Elvis was a fighter. Bower's medical training kicked in and she set about caring for him.

Hah, what a joke, she thought, caring for a severe trauma case with no medical equipment while locked in a cellar with a murderous alien. Only it wasn't a cellar, was it? The windows had been sealed from the outside with steel plates, but she could see through the cracks into the moonlit street outside. And it wasn't a murderous alien, at least not in her case, not yet anyway.

Bower felt she had to stake out some territory. She didn't feel comfortable remaining in plain sight beneath the gaping hole in the upper floor, but she didn't want to chance upon the alien either. She dragged a mattress from the center of the floor, dragging it across beneath one of the steel plates blocking the windows. A thin strand of light pierced the cracks between the plates. Somehow, having a faint glimpse of the outside world gave her hope.

Two of the mattresses near the bottom of the pile were still in their original plastic wrapping. Bower smiled, lost in thought. This would be the closest she'd come to anything sterile. She moved those two as well, leaving the rest of the mattresses where they lay.

Bower tore the protective sheeting off one of the mattresses and reversed the plastic, reasoning that these strips of plastic and cloth taken from a sealed mattress were the closest thing she'd get to fresh bandages and dressings.

Elvis was more difficult to move than the mattresses. Bower pulled him over to the darkened window by grabbing him under his armpits and dragging his legs. She laid him on the plastic she'd turned inside out, with the mattress beneath him, all the while aware she was being watched by otherworldly eyes.

In the half-light, she got her first good look at his arm. The tourniquet was tight, much tighter than she remembered, but that was good. Not only would the tourniquet stem the flow of blood and compress the nerve channels, it would stop the spread of bacteria back

into his body. Looking at Elvis, there wasn't much that could be done for him outside of arranging a medi-evac, and that wasn't going to happen.

Even if she could get a medi-evac, there wasn't much that could be done for him in-country. In any other circumstance, he would have been sent to a specialist US military hospital, either stateside or in Germany. He needed skilled surgeons working on him. The nerves and arteries would require microsurgery to close off properly. His body armor had protected his torso, otherwise the blast would have killed him outright. Bower counted five scraps of shrapnel in his vest, each one larger than a silver dollar.

Bower figured an experienced surgeon would probably amputate the remains of his arm right around where the tourniquet was set. It wouldn't leave much of an arm, but he'd live. She was daydreaming and she knew it. In reality, she was surprised he wasn't dead already.

Combat morphine, she suddenly thought. No, it was fentanyl they carried these days, something much stronger than morphine, and it wasn't in a syringe, it was like candy, something to suck on. From memory, it looked like an elongated lollypop, only without the stick. Bower rummaged through his pockets and the packs lining his belt. Nothing. As Elvis lay there, she inserted her finger gently into his mouth and felt around on the inside of his cheeks. She could feel a sticky substance inside his left cheek. He'd self-administered, and rightly so, and that had been how he'd endured the pain as long as he had.

Using a jagged scrap of metal, Bower cut into the edge of one of the mattresses and tore long strips of material to use as bandages. She wanted to clean and treat his wound as best she could. It was pointless; deep down she knew there was nothing she could do for him. He'd probably linger on for a few hours, perhaps a day, but then he'd die. She had no way of replacing the fluids he'd lost, let alone the blood, and no way of providing him with antibiotics or an intravenous feed, no painkillers, no antiseptics. She was staying busy while he died regardless, and that realization broke her heart.

Bower sobbed.

"Don't you die on me, Elvis. Don't you dare. You're a soldier, damn it. You need to fight for your life."

He couldn't hear her, she knew that, but still she spoke, if only for herself.

"Come on, Elvis, you old hound dog… Come on, you've got to show me those blue suede shoes… Love me tender, Elvis. Don't… be… cruel…"

She pushed her fingers up against his jugular, searching for his pulse. It was there, but it was weak and erratic.

“I’m sorry,” she said softly. “I’m so sorry I got you into this. Oh, God, I’m so sorry.”

Was there anything she could do for him?

Sitting there on the side of the mattress, Bower heard a soft, steady drip. Somewhere, there was a water leak. It was just the distraction she needed. She could wet his lips. Even just a few drops of water in his mouth every minute or so would get absorbed by his body. It was pathetic, but she couldn’t admit that to herself. She had to get Elvis water. She had to do something, anything. In some ways, Elvis became a proxy for her own life. If she could keep him alive it gave her hope for herself.

Bower took several of the torn strips of cloth and followed the wall, listening for the drip. Rats scurried as she approached, or were they insects? And what about the alien? In her concern for Elvis, she’d forgotten about the terror waiting in the dark.

Bower stepped lightly, inching forward slowly with one hand running along the wall, as much for comfort as for guidance. Her heart was racing. Her ears pricked at the slightest sound. She’d never known such darkness.

Further along the floor, moonlight drifted through cracks in the various sealed windows, teasing her with the promise of light. Bower crept onward with one hand tracing the wall and the other out in front of her to avoid bumping into anything in the pitch black of night.

Suddenly, her outstretched hand touched something unearthly. Bower could feel the soft flesh of her palm resting against dozens of stiff spikes, sharp tips like needles. Her heart raced, her breathing stopped. Slowly, she pulled her hand away, only on breaking contact she had no idea where the alien was or what it was doing, and that terrified her even more. When she touched the spikes, the creature had been still. In the darkness, she could hear the alien moving, she only hoped it was moving away from her. Gingerly, she reached out again, feeling at the air. Nothing.

Why would it do that? Why would it block her path? Or was it as blind as she was in the darkness? What did it think of her approach? Did it think she was seeking it out? Her mind raced with the possibilities as fear welled up within.

“Water,” she said. It was irrational, that much was obvious, but Bower felt she had to declare her intentions, even if there was no hope of the creature understanding her. “I need water. We need water or we’ll die.”

There was silence.

“Water… Two hydrogen atoms sharing electrons with a single oxygen atom, forming a simple molecule via a covalent bond.”

She wanted to explain what she needed in scientific terms, as best she could remember them from her high school chemistry classes, but none of this would make sense to an alien and she knew it. And yet, hearing words spoken in the darkness was soothing. By speaking she was making her presence known, she wasn't sneaking around. She hoped the alien understood why she had spoken, even if it didn't understand her words.

"We need water to survive."

There had been no attack. Bower felt this was progress. She was communicating, even if it was one way and poorly understood. She figured the alien would hear that one word, water, repeated and at least understand that water was somehow important.

"Water, that's all I want."

Did aliens have ears? And what were ears except highly sensitive sensory measurements of waves oscillating in diffuse gases? Senses like hearing had to be fundamental, she figured. Every multi-cellular organism on Earth had touch as a sense. The evolutionary path from touch to hearing was well established, and some species, like bats, used sonics instead of sight. Would a creature from another world understand audible communication?

"Water is important for our biology."

She could have kicked herself. Hell, most people on Earth didn't understand biology, let alone an alien intelligence from another planet.

"We're at least sixty percent water. All our chemistry takes place in water. Without water, we will die."

Just keep saying water, she said to herself, try to get the message through. The creature had shown sensitivity to touch, hearing sound was simply touch sensitivity applied to vibrations in the air. Surely, it could hear something.

But what chance was there the alien would even register her speech as deliberate? Even on Earth, speech took multiple forms. Cuttlefish spoke with light, spiders spoke to each other through vibrations within a web, cats spoke more through pheromones, through chemical signatures in their urine, than they ever did with a growl or a snarl. And if humanity couldn't converse with other species on Earth, what hope was there of talking to an alien? Even intelligent mammals, like apes and dolphins, were limited to the most rudimentary of human concepts.

"Water."

She could hear water dripping nearby.

Moonlight drifted through the cracks. She could see the alien barely fifteen feet away, close enough to strike if it so chose. The alien had backed up, crossing into a thin stream of light breaking through

the steel shutters. Its tentacles or fronds or whips or spikes or whatever they were waved in the soft breeze cutting through the stifling heat. The creature had positioned itself beside one of the steel panels covering the next window, drawing on whatever draft circulated within their dark tomb.

"All I want is the water. I'll take some water and leave you alone in this dungeon. Do you understand. Water, and I leave."

The creature remained where it was, its thin arms waving softly like wheat in the fields. If it had heard her it didn't show. Bower felt like she was creeping up on a lion in the undergrowth.

As her fingers ran along the wall she felt a steel pipe running vertically. She followed it down to a dripping tap. Although she couldn't make out the pipe in the dark she could tell it ran up from the ground to the floor above. There was probably another tap directly above this one on the upper floor.

Looking at the crack between the steel panel and the wooden window frame, Bower could see a large splinter of loose wood. It was no more than an inch or so wide but it was almost two feet in length. If she could pull that away she'd get a better look outside, not only that, she'd let in more light. What would the creature make of such an act? Would it feel threatened?

"Water," she said, hoping to reinforce that she wanted nothing more, even with this act.

With her eyes on the alien fronds, Bower gripped the splinter and pulled gently on it, hoping it would give way easily. The shard of wood was still firmly attached at its base, but she was able to twist the splinter sideways, widening the gap.

Moonlight crept in through the thin crack.

The creature continued to watch her impassively, or was she imagining it watching her. Did the alien eye her with curiosity or malice? Did it recognize any such notion? Did it even have eyes? Somehow, the creature had seen them wielding the gun.

Water dripped with regular monotony from the tap into a puddle next to the drain. To her surprise, she could see insects swarming about the small pool of water on the floor. A trail of insects led back to the alien. For a moment, Bower lost her fear.

"Water," she said. "You too need water."

The alien didn't respond.

Bower knelt down, looking at the insects swarming around the puddle. On one level, she felt repulsed, but what looked like cockroaches were clearly alien. The tiny creatures had segmented bodies with an exoskeleton much like an insect on Earth, and yet they appeared spherical, not just round in two dimensions. They seemed to be able to swivel beneath their shell segments, so there was no way of

telling which way they were facing other than by the direction in which they traveled. That is, if facing in a certain direction held any meaning for them.

The insects varied in size from that of a small bead or a pea to a marble, with the largest being no more than tiny black Ping-Pong balls with crab-like legs. There had to be more to them than that, but in the half-light, that was all Bower could distinguish, and there was no way she was going to touch one of them or pick them up for a closer look. They were gathering water somehow, moving in a living stream as they scuttled between the puddle and the alien creature.

Bower turned the rusty tap, allowing water to flow softly. She cupped her hands and drank deeply. The water was fresh, as fresh as could be expected in Africa. Bower soaked the makeshift bandages in the water. She went to turn off the tap but thought better of it. Perhaps the alien creature would understand this as a gesture of friendship. The insects seemed excited by the additional water flow, even though all it did was to run out of the puddle and into the drain.

Bower couldn't turn her back on the creature. She wanted to know where it was, so she retraced her steps as she moved back along the wall. When she was no more than two shuttered windows away, a distance of perhaps twenty feet, the creature moved forward into the moonlight by the water tap.

"Water," she said as a means of bidding the creature farewell. Finally, she turned away and headed back to Elvis.

Sitting there on the mattress, Bower cradled his head, squeezing the cloths one by one into his mouth. Some of the water dribbled out, but in a reflex reaction he seemed to swallow some of the water as well.

Bower was tired. She wanted to stay awake. She felt a sense of obligation to stay awake and look after Elvis even though she knew there was nothing she could do for him. Try as she may, sleep overtook her and she slumped on the mattress next to him.

# Chapter 11: Morning

Morning broke with birds singing outside the factory.

For a moment, Bower forgot where she was. In the soft light, her eyes deceived her. The air within the ground floor had cooled overnight, providing a pleasant relief from the day before. Already, the heat was starting to build, but for now it was almost a summer's day in England.

It was the smell that shocked her. Having been in Africa for almost two years, Bower was use to the rancid smell of overpopulated cities, but this smell was different, like the stench of rotten meat burning in a fire.

Beside her, she could hear the soft clatter of insects swarming over each other. She turned, horrified to see Elvis buried alive by a swarm of alien insects. They were crawling all over him, burying him, covering his arms and legs, running through his hair, over his face. Beyond them, the blood-red alien creature stood like a sentinel. Bower was repulsed by the thought they were devouring his body.

"No," she yelled, scrambling to her feet.

Bower crouched, ready to jump at the creatures and pull him to safety, but there were thousands of them swamping him.

"Don't eat him. Leave him. Let him go."

Her movement startled the spiky alien looming over Elvis with its blade-like fronds. The alien flexed, seemingly doubling in size. Its tentacles, previously limp and waving like the branches of a tree, struck out like spears. This was the best view she'd had of the animal. Could it be called an animal? Perhaps not in the terrestrial sense of the word, but it was a living creature.

The spiky alien was on the other side of the mattress, directly opposite her, with Elvis lying beneath the beetles or bugs or whatever they were between them. The central mass of the creature, inside its outer barrier of scarlet tentacles and spikes, was awash with these insects. They swarmed around its body, moving in waves, pulsating like bees within a hive. She could see streams of these tiny creatures scurrying down the alien's stiff, spiky legs and over towards Elvis.

"No," she yelled again, losing her fear and stepping forward toward Elvis. "Get off him. Leave him alone."

Bower began pulling handfuls of insects from his body, sweeping them away, trying to clear them from him. The insects became highly agitated. They hissed and snapped what seemed to be mandibles together, threatening to devour her.

She had to save him. She couldn't let Elvis die, not like this. And yet, for all she knew, he was already dead.

Bower grabbed at his shoulders, trying to pull him away from the alien creature and the swarm of insects.

Hundreds of the tiny creatures began climbing up her arms, tearing at her trousers and scaling her legs, but she wouldn't give up on Elvis, even if it meant the death of both of them. Bower staggered backwards as the insects climbed up to her face, forcing her to drop him as she fought desperately to brush them away.

The alien never moved, which surprised her. It seemed content to let these miniature assassins overpower her.

Insects clambered over the mattress.

"No," she cried again. "Don't you understand?"

She had Elvis by the collar and was dragging him across the mattress.

"Don't you know? Life is too important. Life is too precious."

Elvis was heavy. She couldn't move him more than a few inches at a time. She was crying, sobbing.

"No. Please, leave him alone."

The dark insect-like creatures clambered up her hair, crawling across her neck and face. She shook herself, swatting herself, knocking them from her.

With all the energy she could muster, Bower lifted Elvis, pushing off with her legs, using her thighs to drive away from the horde of insects covering the ground. She exposed his upper torso, while the sea of insects spread out around her, encircling her. And it was then she saw his arm.

Whereas before, his left arm had been severed above the elbow, the humerus bone now extended down to a bare joint, connecting to the ulna and radius bones of the forearm. The bones were wrapped in a transparent coating, a membrane of some sort. Blood pumped, lymph fluids surged in response to contracting muscles. Tendons, nerves and veins, they were all there in an anemic form, as though his was the arm of a malnourished child. The tourniquet was gone. The ragged, torn flesh from his upper arm had been knitted back into muscle and sinew. Although his bicep and triceps were thin, they had attached to tendons on the lower humerus.

"No. Please, leave him alone."

Bower froze.

A chill ran through her.

These were her words, but she hadn't spoken them.

"Don't you understand? Life is too important. Life is too precious."

Those words seemed to come from all around her. Even though she was looking at the large alien creature with its spikes and tentacles, the words repeated back at her came from no particular

direction at all.

Bower released her grip on Elvis, allowing him to sink back into the swarm of alien beetles and bugs. As she did so, the creatures climbing over her dropped back to the floor and scurried away.

Stunned, she staggered backwards, tripping on the soft mattress but keeping her footing.

Bower watched as the alien creature emptied of the tiny bugs. To her surprise, there was no central mass. The scarlet spikes extended all the way to the center without forming any central bulge at all. With all the insects crawling over Elvis, the alien creature was stationary, completely still. It was then she realized what she was looking at: an empty frame, a shell. What she and everyone else had assumed was the alien was nothing more than a vehicle, a vessel. In the same way as humans used tanks, armored personnel carriers, helicopters and airplanes for transport and as weapons, the alien was using this organic contraption sitting stationary before her.

Alien or aliens? What she'd thought of as inconsequential worker bees gathering water had actually been at the heart of what she assumed was a single entity. This is what the spiky framework had wanted to protect when she held the gun. And now they were swarming over Elvis, repairing his arm.

As best she understood what she was seeing, these tiny insects were the alien intelligence. And as she watched she understood how vulnerable these creatures were in that moment, they'd committed themselves wholly to rebuilding his arm, leaving their protective weaponry standing idly by.

Bower crouched down, watching carefully. The tiny creatures were consuming the mattress, the springs within the mattress and a nearby wooden crate. Somehow, they were gathering the material they needed or converting these raw materials into what they required for their task.

Bower was speechless. For this to work, they had to be operating at a microscopic level, applying some kind of nanotechnology that allowed them to cultivate cellular growth at a radical pace. She'd been asleep for probably six or seven hours, and the results of their efforts so far were spectacular.

Were they reading his DNA and fabricating his arm in the same way humans would build a car? Or were they accelerating natural processes in some way? They had to be stimulating some kind of pluripotent cells, like stem cells. But how did they control the growth? How were they directing the appropriate response for building arteries in one area, bone in another? Get those mixed up and the results could be fatal.

Bower could see the vague outline of Elvis lying beneath the

swarm. Those creatures that sat over his right arm were unusually still, whereas most of the creatures were moving around rapidly, these remained stationary. They had to be using his bilateral symmetry to guide them. Somehow they were sensing the structure of his right arm and mimicking a mirror image on the left. Bower was intrigued. Most people had arms and hands of differing sizes, with the right normally bigger than the left. She wanted to check his new arm once it was fully formed to see if that still applied, or if his new left arm was an exact mirror of the right.

Hunger pangs gnawed at her stomach, but she ignored them.

In the soft light, she left the creatures to go about their work and went to the tap for a drink of water.

On her way, she crept up behind one of the crates near the central pile of mattresses. She sat there for a few minutes listening, hidden from sight beneath the open hole. There was no one on the upper floor. She could hear movement out on the street, but not upstairs.

While getting some water, Bower peered out through the widened gap in the wooden frame. She tried pulling on the splinter of wood, and managed to enlarge her view a little.

Peering down the road, Bower could see steel beams propped up against the outside of the shutters. Adan, it seemed, was determined the alien creature would not escape.

The street beside the factory was quiet. Occasionally, she'd see a soldier walking casually down what looked more of a lane-way than a road. The building at the far end seemed to be important, and must have fronted a main road as trucks and bicycles sped by. From what she could tell, they were nowhere near where they had been taken captive. She couldn't put her finger on why she thought that, other than that the buildings looked somehow different.

After checking on Elvis and seeing him still buried in a swarm of tiny creatures, Bower decided to explore the rest of the lower floor. The spiked alien sat motionless to one side of Elvis, confirming her suspicions that it was a vessel rather than a living, intelligent creature of its own, and that fascinated her.

"I'm just going to look around to see what I can find," she said, not sure who she was talking to, and certainly not expecting an answer. It just seemed polite. The creatures crawling over Elvis ignored her so she wandered off. Bower was careful not to step on the various thin streams of creatures disappearing into the darkness as they went out across the floor like ants, presumably hunting down more raw materials for the reconstruction of his arm.

The lower floor was almost a hundred yards long by thirty yards wide, reminding her of the dimensions of a football field. There were offices at either end, but these had been boarded up with wood rather

than steel plates. She tried to break through one of the doors, but that only worked in Hollywood, and she ended up with a sore shoulder after barging the door a couple of times. There was a kitchenette. The tap worked. There was soap and a couple of sponges, not that she needed them. She found a butter knife and a couple of forks in one of the drawers along with a small plastic jug so she took them. There was no food, which was a bit disheartening, and she went back through the cupboards a couple of times just to make sure she hadn't missed anything.

A locked door at the end of the corridor between the sealed offices led to the road outside. As this was at the opposite end to where she'd seen the soldiers entering what looked like their headquarters, she took hope that this door could be a good place to escape.

Bower lay on her stomach and tried to look beneath the door. Using the knife, she lifted the weather strip on the other side of the door and peered out. There was no noise outside. After a few minutes, a car drove past and she could hear people laughing within the vehicle, but other than that the back road seemed deserted. Bower wondered if there was a guard standing watch. Surely, they had someone watching their alien enclosure. They could have been standing to one side of the door and she'd never have known it. Patiently, she waited, realizing the more she could learn the more options they'd have once Elvis was back to full strength.

After an hour, she was satisfied that there wasn't a guard on the back door. She got up and looked carefully at the door. The hinges were on the inside. She tried lifting one with the dull blade of the knife but couldn't get it to budge. It might be something Elvis could manage, though. And for the first time she felt as though they were going to get out of this mess alive.

Bower returned to Elvis and sat there watching as the alien insects continued their work. She would have loved to watch the progress in more detail, but had to accept that something remarkable was occurring at a cellular level beneath this swarm of small, intelligent creatures.

Hours passed like years. Bower noted that the black sheen on what appeared to be the outer shell of the alien insects would take on different hues at times, but these were coordinated. In addition to that, the motion of those creatures attending to Elvis seemed to undulate in some kind of rhythm. For her, it confirmed what she suspected, that these creatures were working in unison as though they were one organism. She went and cleaned the knife and forks in running water and collected some water in the jug.

Shortly before sunset, Bower heard someone walking on the

upper floor. She crept behind a broken wooden crate, being careful to remain hidden, and watched with interest. Two soldiers appeared, but from the number of voices she could hear, she figured there were more of them standing just out of sight, or it could have been that the others were further around the hole and thus out of her field of vision.

"There's the gun," said one of the African rebels.

"But did you see them die? Did you see the monster kill them?"

One of the soldiers shone a light into the darkness.

"Are you serious?" he asked, moving the light across the carnage. "Do you think anyone could survive down there? Look at the insects, look at how they feed on the blood."

Bower hadn't noticed, but the rebel soldier was right. A stream of tiny alien creatures fed on the blood, gristle and sinew. They must have been using this in the reconstruction.

"There has been another fight," said another soldier. "They are dead. There is no way they could have defeated the monster."

"General Adan wants to be sure."

"I am sure," one of the soldiers said from somewhere out of sight above her. "What? Do you want to go in there and check?"

"I'm not going down there."

"Hah," replied the first soldier to speak. "There is no way I am going in there with the beast. They are dead. That is all Adan needs to know."

"But there are no bodies."

"There are never any bodies."

For a moment, the spotlight rested on the crate Bower was hiding behind and she thought she'd been spotted, but nothing was said. The light moved on, flickering around the edges of the central area.

"There is so much blood. So much fresh blood."

"Yeah," another soldier agreed, seemingly talking himself into the same conclusion. "The blood is fresh. They are dead. They have beaten Adan to the grave."

Bower was relieved when they left, and the realization the soldiers considered them dead meant no one would be looking for them when they made their escape. She returned and sat beside Elvis.

Night fell and the tiny creatures continued their work in the dark.

A cool breeze fought to make its way through the cracks in the steel plates sealing the windows. Bower stood there for a while, willing the faint draft to blow harder. The alien ignored her. She liked that. Given the alternative she'd faced when they were shoved into the hole, being ignored was a gift.

She wondered about the creature or creatures, wondering about their biology, how they functioned as a unit, where their intelligence emanated from, how their metabolisms worked, what they consumed,

if they respired.

Were they carbon-based or silicon? She didn't really understand how that worked, other than that it described the primary atom making up the various molecules that formed the creature. How would you tell, she wondered? Could it be a hybrid of the two? Visually, there weren't any obvious clues.

For Bower, the idea that the same basic set of atoms, forming roughly the same molecules, could result in life on another planet was astonishing. And that the laws of the universe gave rise to another intelligent species, one capable of traversing the stars to seek out other life forms, was mind-boggling. Although, she thought, looking at the dark walls that surrounded them, this probably wasn't what the alien had in mind when it signed on for this particular interstellar mission.

Bower sat down on the mattress and watched the creatures busying themselves. There was something hypnotic in their tireless rhythm. She found her eyelids growing heavy, although in the end she fell asleep more through boredom than anything else.

When she awoke with the dawn, the alien was gone.

Elvis lay alone on the shredded, collapsed remains of the double mattress next to hers. She crept over beside him, looking at his left arm in wonder. He'd need some physiotherapy to build up muscle mass, as the arm looked thin and withered, but apart from that his new arm looked entirely normal, although the skin was pale.

Bower ran her fingers down his arm, feeling the texture of the muscles and bones beneath his skin. As much as she hated to draw on a cliche, the skin on his hand was as smooth as a baby's bottom, and that brought a smile to her face.

Elvis groaned, responding to her touch. His eyes flickered. Her eyes widened. She was so excited. Did he know what had happened? Did he have any conscious awareness of what he'd undergone? Or was he experiencing something akin to waking from a general anesthetic?

Elvis tried to speak, but his voice was croaky.

Bower helped him sit up, propping him against the wall. Coarse stubble covered his cheeks, his upper lip and chin, marring his usually impeccable image. His sideburns looked shabby.

Bower gave him a sip of water.

"What the hell happened?" Elvis managed.

Bower simply smiled. Something in her eyes seemed to trigger the realization and his hands shot out in front of him.

"Wh- How?"

Elvis turned both hands over. The look on his face was one of awe. He was clearly fascinated by his new left arm and hand. Gently, he ran his right hand over the fingers on his left hand, around his wrist and worked slowly up toward his elbow before moving around

to his upper arm and bicep.

"How do you feel?"

"I feel… fine, just a little weak."

"No pain?"

"None."

Bower had tears in her eyes.

"How did you?" he asked.

"Not me," Bower replied. "The creature. Somehow, it rebuilt your arm."

"But why? What happened?"

"I shot Adan," Bower replied in a matter-of-fact tone. "I guess the alien approved."

Elvis laughed. He went to get up but fell back against the wall. His head rolled back. He looked exhausted.

"Does it feel any different?" she asked.

Elvis thought about the question for a moment before replying, "No. It just looks so… child-like."

Bower smiled, saying, "I suspect with time and a bit of exercise, you'll be fine."

"But if it… then why Bosco? Why kill Bosco?"

"I don't know. The creature must have felt threatened, perhaps scared. If I'd been stranded on an alien planet and they corralled me into some dark, musty prison and spoiled for a fight, I'd be terrified too."

"You think it's scared?" Elvis seemed perplexed by the concept that an alien could feel fear.

"We've seen too many movies," Bower continued. "Too many movies with badass aliens that have no remorse. In Hollywood, aliens have acid for blood, or they fly spaceships with ray guns we cannot hope to match. They transform themselves into huge, terrifying beasts. And they can only be beaten by some downcast, reject of a hero, and only after an epic struggle. It seems reality would beg to differ."

"But… but that thing tore him apart."

"I've been thinking about that," Bower replied. "I've been able to observe the alien in a number of different settings, and I think we've got our wires crossed. What we think of as 'The Alien' is probably nothing more than a Hummer or a tank from its perspective. The alien itself seems more like a hive of bees. I guess there's a queen in there somewhere, but those thrashing tentacles are a diversion. The real creature is in that swarm, or perhaps is the swarm itself."

Elvis was silent.

"It spoke to me."

"It did?" Elvis asked, surprised.

"Yes, but not coherently. It repeated my own words back at me,

but they were appropriate, they made sense. I'm not sure how, but it spoke, probably not using anything even remotely familiar to us, not using vocal chords. Perhaps it was like an amplifier and a speaker, but it was mimicry. It never said anything I hadn't said first."

Elvis shifted his weight, stretching his muscles.

"There's one thing I don't understand," Bower said.

Elvis waited for her to continue.

"Why didn't they shoot?"

"The rebels?" he asked.

"Yeah. I mean, I'd just shot General Adan. They had me dead to rights. There were so many of them, they all had rifles. Why didn't they shoot? They could have shot us like fish in a barrel. Why didn't they kill us?"

"You have to remember who you're dealing with," Elvis began. "These aren't professional soldiers. They're thugs. And General Adan ain't no general. He's an egomaniac. Our closest equivalent would be a mobster, someone like Al Capone. Only Adan is worse. Warlords surround themselves with mythos.

"Up on the tableland, we had one of the outlying chiefs tell his troops he was bulletproof. To them, he was a god. In the same way, Adan would have spent years cultivating a loyal following, building a cult around his personality. Those rebel soldiers were never trained to think for themselves. They were trained to blindly follow orders."

"So no one told them to shoot?" Bower asked.

"Maybe. Who knows? The shock of seeing their glorious, invincible leader struck down would have shattered their world, perhaps only for that instant, but it was enough for them to leave us to the monster.

"It's the African big-man syndrome. They demand absolute loyalty. They talk big. There's a strict hierarchy. Once you shot Adan, there was no one in a position to say, fire. Remember, most of these so-called soldiers were kids or teens when they were recruited into this Mafiosi. There's no honor, there's no dedication, not in the way we think of it. The top brass are motivated by ideology, but the rank and file follow whoever feeds them."

Bower sipped at the water in the jug. She offered some to Elvis. He forced himself to sit up and gulped down the water, emptying the jug.

"Where is it?" he asked, wiping his mouth. "The alien, where did it go?"

"I don't know," Bower replied.

"I bet the alien wants to get out of here as badly as we do… I think it helped us so we would help it escape."

Elvis was stiff as he moved, swinging his legs around slowly so he

could stand.

"Whoa, cowboy. You're not going anywhere," Bower cried, putting her hands out and keeping him seated on the side of the shredded mattress. "And as for your theory, I'm not sure we should be striking up an alliance just yet. We know nothing about this creature and its motives."

"It's trapped," Elvis replied. "Just like us. We both need to escape."

"We need to be careful, Elvis. We can't read our own emotions into those of an alien intelligence."

"I've got to see it," Elvis said. "That thing saved my life. It didn't have to, but it did, that means something. Please, help me stand."

Bower helped him to his feet. His knees were weak. It seemed to take all his strength not to fall back to the mattress. Bower put his right arm over her shoulder and took some of his weight.

Thin strands of light seeped through the cracks in the barricaded windows. Dark shadows spread across the floor.

There was no movement.

Together, they struggled forward. Elvis shuffled his feet as he walked.

Bower heard a noise from the far end of the floor. They hobbled on and found the alien in the kitchenette opening out onto the factory. The creature was examining the drawers Bower had been through the day before.

The alien stopped what it was doing as they approached. Its tentacles froze and for the first time Bower saw some recognition of their presence in its actions. The core of the hybrid creature pulsated with a rhythm that reminded her of a cardiovascular system, but she understood that what looked like a rippling, undulating surface was actually a swarm of individual creatures.

"It's retracing my steps," Bower whispered.

"It wants to escape," Elvis replied.

The tentacles continued sweeping over the drawers and cupboards, touching the counter and the kitchen sink.

Elvis urged Bower on, edging closer, moving to within a few feet.

The tentacles closest to them stiffened into razor-sharp spikes.

Although Bower flinched, Elvis held no fear of the creature.

Mentally, she knew this was an intelligent being and that the creature meant no harm to her and Elvis, having rebuilt his arm, but after seeing Bosco shredded in seconds, Bower was well aware of the possibility for unbridled violence, and she couldn't shake that image from her mind.

The pulsating mass of insects was probably three to four feet in diameter, she figured, perhaps more. In the soft light, she could detect

a flicker of color and a slight hum.

Although Bower had interacted with the alien on several occasions, this was the first opportunity Elvis had to see the creature as anything other than a lethal killing machine. His only memory had been of the alien tearing Bosco apart and then of their attempts to shoot the creature, and yet he seemed unusually relaxed. He'd been unconscious when the alien had operated on him, and yet Bower sensed some knowing awareness between him and the alien entity.

Elvis stretched out his feeble left arm, reaching across the kitchen bench between them. The alien responded, its blade-like fronds wrapped around his hand as a stream of tiny creatures raced back and forth, clambering over his fingertips.

Bower was fascinated.

A sense of awe overwhelmed her natural desire for caution.

Elvis breathed deeply. He pulled his hand back and the tiny creatures returned to the core of the thorny alien structure.

The spiky creature rolled out of the kitchenette, moving slowly around toward them. Bower backed up, but Elvis didn't move, limiting her ability to step away.

"Wait," he whispered.

Light crept around the doorframe at the end of the hallway. Fine lines crisscrossed the dust. Bower could see how the creature had tracked her motion. It must have been curious to know what she was looking for beneath the door.

The massive creature moved toward them, squeezing through the doorway leading from the kitchenette, the tips of its fronds touching lightly against the ceiling.

What she had thought of as the alien transportation device rolled up to them.

Bower pulled away, but Elvis stood his ground.

"Relax," he said. "It's OK."

Dark red fronds waved before her. Bower was in two minds. This alien framework seemed to be alive, she figured, looking at the fluid motion with which it swayed, and yet she'd seen it standing idle, like an abandoned car. Perhaps this was the alien equivalent of a pack horse, while the rider was the intimidating swarm of minuscule creatures at its core.

Elvis resisted her attempt to pull back. He clearly wanted to see what the creature would do.

"It won't hurt you," he whispered.

Bower wasn't so sure. She swallowed the lump in her throat, stiffening her muscles as a clutch of fine tentacles touched at her face and neck. Her instinctive reaction was a sense of revulsion, but she suppressed that feeling and tried not to turn away. Tiny insect-like

creatures clambered along the outstretch tentacles, racing up toward her face. Bower shut her eyes. She couldn't look. The fronds were gentle, as soft as suede, passing lightly over her cheeks, across the bridge of her nose, over her eyebrows and across her lips. Bower couldn't stop shaking.

"Easy, girl. Easy," Elvis whispered. "Just go with it."

The tentacles withdrew.

Bower opened her eyes.

Several insects sat on the tips of the alien fronds, just inches from her face, apparently taking a good look at her.

"Retracing steps."

Again, it was her voice spoken back to her.

"Yes," she said softly in reply. "I was looking to escape."

Bower hadn't noticed until now, but Elvis had relaxed. He still had his arm over her shoulder, but he no longer leaned so heavily on her. She turned to one side, allowing the spiny creature to twist and turn on its spikes and roll out onto the darkened factory floor.

This was the first opportunity she'd had to observe the alien's locomotion in detail.

Although the tips of the spikes appeared rigid when the alien rolled forward, they flexed as they brushed the concrete, almost slapping the ground for grip. Bower figured the creature could race in any direction it chose without appearing to change its orientation. It could probably turn on the proverbial dime.

"Escape," the creature said, using her voice as it weaved its way around a crate and out of sight.

Bower and Elvis stood there for a few minutes. Her heart was racing, her palms were sweaty.

The alien headed to the far side of the floor. It seemed the creature wanted to keep its distance, to stay away from them. Well, she figured, honestly, that was probably through mutual consent.

"Magnificent," Elvis said as the creature disappeared into the shadows.

Bower was silent. She was still struggling with what the alien creature was and how to communicate with it. The alien appeared to be just as flustered with the communication gap. Although the creature used human terms appropriately, it seemed it had to learn them first. Somehow the creature had a grasp of the fundamentals of speech. Perhaps not speech as she understood it, but it knew how to associate human sounds with distinct concepts, and to her surprise, the creature got those concepts right.

Bower had just interacted with a creature from another world. As the realization settled in her mind, she felt jubilant, as though a weight had been lifted.

They hobbled away from the kitchenette.

Bower felt chatty, overwhelmed by a desire to articulate what had just happened, to make sense of the encounter for herself if for no one else. She distinctly remembered the same feeling of exuberance following her first encounter with a dolphin as a teenager.

“My mother is from Berlin,” she began, barely able to contain herself. “I used to spend my holidays there with my grandmother.

“I speak three languages, but I’m only fluent in English. Several of my friends are truly bilingual, and although I can speak French and German, I struggle to make the mental switch between thinking in English to thinking and reasoning in French or German.”

Elvis listened. He seemed to appreciate how she was working through what had just happened.

“I can translate with ease and occasionally I think in German, but English is home, so I think I understand how this creature feels. I used to be so envious of those that could make the switch effortlessly. Perhaps this alien creature feels the same. Language has to be a universal constant, differing only in how it is communicated.”

Elvis was silent as they staggered on through the darkness.

In her mind’s eye, Bower was back in Germany, a wide-eyed young lady on summer break. She could remember the sights and smells, the sweltering humidity, the lush farmlands, the fresh fruits. She remembered how difficult it was to order coffee or to find her way around the city as she stumbled over the language.

Bower’s grandmother had worked at the Helen Keller school in Berlin. She was a teacher and had introduced Bower to several blind students her age. Bower had been impressed by their agility of mind, their ability to compensate for the loss of sight. Now, in the gloomy shell of an abandoned factory, the pieces of the puzzle seemed to fall into place.

“Think about it,” she said. “Even on Earth there are several different ways of sharing concepts. As closely related as speech appears to be to writing, they’re really worlds apart. We’ve largely settled on dark marks on paper to represent speech, but raised dots on a page work equally as well for the blind, while hand gestures and facial inflections convey the same versatility using nothing more than sight to speak to the deaf. For this alien creature, human speech probably feels a little like sign-language would to you or me.”

“Huh,” Elvis replied.

Bower was working herself into a manic state, a kind of euphoria. If she didn’t know better she’d have sworn someone just slipped her some hash cookies.

“Whether it’s words spoken in the air, letters on a page, or fingers curled and tapped on the opposing hand, language is about taking

abstract, meaningless grunts, markings and gestures, and using them to express our thoughts."

Bower marveled at the implications.

"Instinct requires little in the way of thought. Instinct is reactionary, but even the most instinctive of creatures need some versatility beyond reacting, and that's how intelligence first emerged.

"I used to volunteer in the dolphinarium in Berlin as a teenager. We could see dolphins were intelligent, but communicating with them was frustratingly difficult and limited. There was no doubt our dolphins were smart, but they were smart in an entirely different manner to humans.

"Over the last century, we've studied tens of thousands of dolphins in a variety of settings, from marine biology laboratories to sea world theme parks. We've observed their physiology, their habits, their interactions with fishermen and children, their culture, their language, and yet we can't speak with them. They're intelligent mammals like us, and yet we can't converse with them. They can learn from us and communicate on our terms, but we're yet to learn anything about their language, if their communication could even be called speech. Perhaps we'll have the same difficulties talking with creatures from another world."

Bower laughed at the thought, adding, "That alien probably thought it was dealing with the galactic equivalent of dolphins."

"Eek, eek," Elvis replied, joking.

Bower laughed. She hoped the alien couldn't hear them. What would this interstellar being make of that? Humor worked only if you were in on the joke.

"And music," she continued, her mind firing rapidly as it extended logical connections. "Written music is as much a language as any other, communicating harmonic aesthetics rather than words, emotions rather than ideas."

Her mind was buzzing with these concepts as they approached the mattresses over against the steel shutters.

Elvis said, "If we're going to get out of this hell hole, we need to work together, and that means being able to communicate with the creature."

He slumped onto the one, remaining good mattress.

"How are you feeling?" she asked.

"Exhausted."

"I'll get you some more water."

Bower took the plastic jug and worked her way along the wall, looking for the leaking tap. A couple of soldiers walked past talking. Bower was silent, not wanting to give herself away. She took her time filling the jug, trying not to make any undue noise.

With the sun high in the sky, the heat within the darkened factory was oppressive. Sweat dripped from her brow. She drank and then returned with a full jug.

"Adan is dead," Elvis whispered as she handed him the water jug. That got her attention.

"I heard a couple of soldiers talking while you were gone. They're trying to figure out what to do with the creature."

"What are they planning?" Bower asked, her eyes widening with fear.

"They weren't in earshot for long, so I only picked up on a fraction of their conversation, but they're going to burn down the factory. From what I could tell, sounds like they're having problems coming up with enough fuel to flood the floor. They don't want that thing escaping. I suspect they've got plenty of diesel, but need some gasoline to get the party started."

"We've got to get out of here." It was something they both said at once in almost perfect unison. Bower smiled and gestured to Elvis to continue.

"We've got to make a move tonight."

Bower held up the butter-knife, saying, "The steel door at the far end of the floor; the hinges are on the inside. I tried to budge them but they're too stiff."

Elvis scratched the stubble on his chin, saying, "OK, that's good. We can work with that. Try to find a large stone, something you could hold in your hand, preferably with a flat surface, and we'll use that as a hammer. The hinges might have seized, but a few sharp taps should get some movement."

"And then what?" Bower asked, trying not to be too idealistic about their escape. Getting outside the building was one thing, but that didn't mean they were free. It could be the reverse; they could be going from the frying pan into the fire.

"We're going to need a truck."

"A truck?"

"For our friend. And, besides, we'll stand a much better chance being mobile than on foot."

"We're taking the alien with us?" Bower asked, surprised by the notion. They'd loosely discussed freeing the creature, but she hadn't considered taking the alien with them. "Why?"

"Because it doesn't stand a chance alone."

"But it can tear people apart," Bower reasoned, not understanding his point.

"Do you know how you hunt a lion or a tiger?"

Bower was silent.

"In packs. Either one of them is more than a match for a lone

hunter, but against a group of men working together, they don't stand a chance. No, our buddy wouldn't last more than an hour out there alone. He'd attract too much attention."

"He?" Bower asked, objecting to the arbitrary assignment of gender.

Elvis smiled, looking very much the rock star he did when she first met him, albeit one that had been partying hard for several days non-stop.

"OK, Honey," Elvis replied, "It… It would attract too much attention."

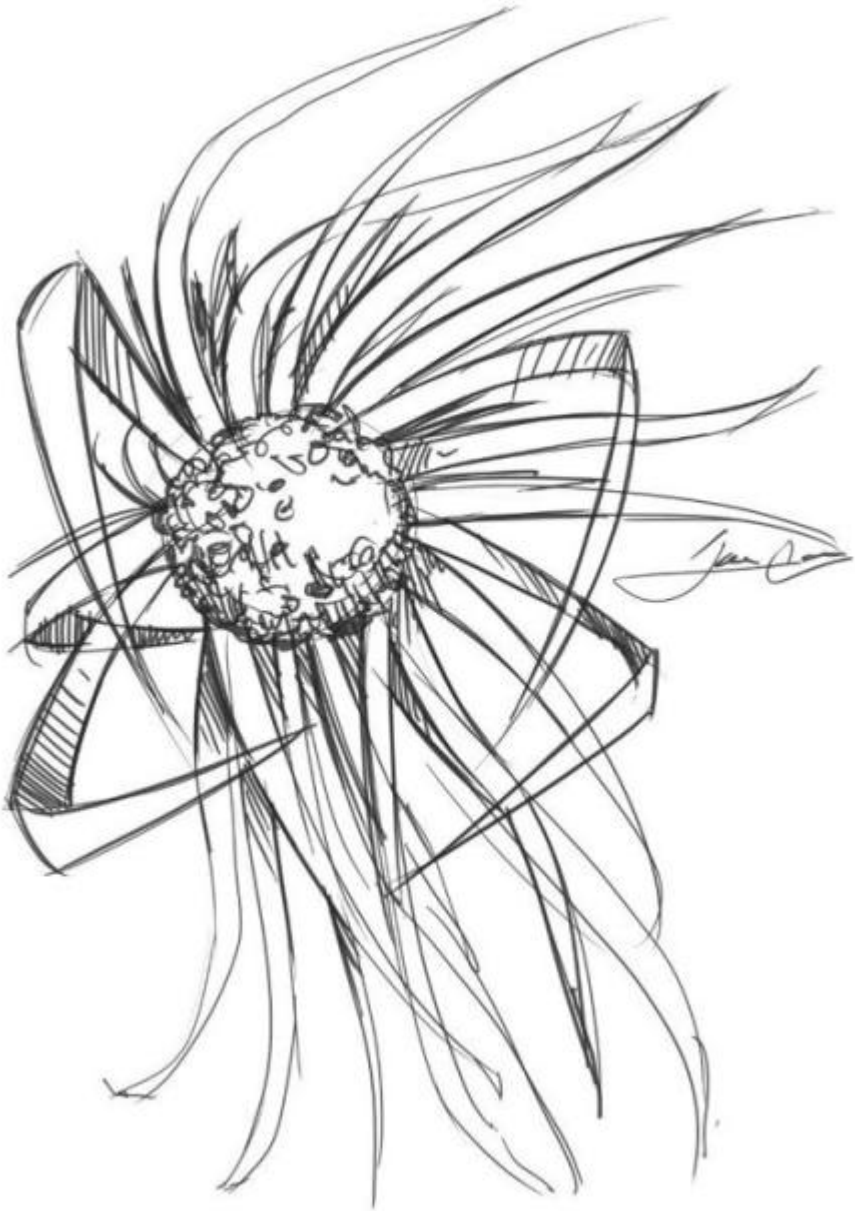
"So, where will we take her?" Bower asked, being deliberately provocative. She suspected the whole notion of gender was irrelevant, it certainly looked that way, but she liked stirring Elvis, and it was good for his morale, she could see that from the grin on his face.

"We take her with us," Elvis replied, resigning himself to her not-so-subtle spin on the creature's anthropomorphic gender identity. "Jameson's out there somewhere. We need to hook up with him and get the hell out of Dodge."

"With a creature from another world in the back of our truck?"

"Why not?"

"Why not indeed," Bower replied. "Best idea I've heard all day."



# Chapter 12: Night

Bower had fallen asleep.

The sound of trucks driving down the alleyway beside the factory woke her from her slumber. Elvis was standing by a crack in the steel shutters, peering outside. It was good to see him on his feet.

"Tankers," he said softly. "They're getting ready for the party."

Bower got to her feet and peered out of another crack. She watched as a soldier climbed down from the cab of a truck and slammed the door. The sign on the side of the tanker read "Water," which confused her.

"Water?" she asked.

"It wouldn't go down too well if they torched the entire neighborhood," Elvis replied. He pointed further down the alley. "I got a glimpse of a gasoline tanker as well. It's going to be quite a show."

"We've got to get out of here."

"Not so fast," Elvis replied. "We don't do nothing till all's quiet and everyone's asleep. Patience, Doc. It's a fundamental of good military strategy."

Bower knew he was right, but she didn't like waiting. She was stir crazy. It was irrational and she knew it, but she had to get out of their oppressive prison. She no longer feared the darkness, but she was hungry, her back ached, she had a headache, and none of that made being patient any easier.

"Moonrise occurred less than ninety minutes after sunset. When the moon is directly overhead, it'll be around one or two in the morning. That's when we'll make our move."

"How will you know," Bower asked, straining to see the sky through the thin cracks in the seal windows. She couldn't see the moon.

"Shadows. When the shadows are shortest, the moon is at its zenith. There will come a point where the shadows stop shrinking and start growing again, changing direction, when that happens, the moon has begun to descend. That's when we'll make our move."

Bower gritted her teeth. She was anxious.

"You could never wait for Christmas, could you?" Elvis asked.

"Nope."

Bower sat down again on the edge of the mattress. She was feeling weak from a lack of food and the stress of running on adrenalin. Her legs were shaking, but not out of fear, just fatigue.

"So," Elvis began. "What about Stella? How do we get her to come with us?"

“Stella?” Bower asked in surprise. She knew who he meant, she was surprised by his choice of name.

“She needs a name,” he replied

“And that name is Stella?”

“It means star.”

“I know what it means,” Bower said gently. She shook her head. In a serious tone, she added, “Just remember, cute and cuddly Stella can rip your arms out of their sockets. She can flay your flesh quicker than a Great White Shark. Were she to come up against a full-grown African lion or a thirty-foot crocodile, my money would be on her walking away without a scratch.”

“And yet she didn’t hurt me,” he protested. “She saved my life.”

“You’ve seen her in action. Remember, she no more identifies with you than you do with a wild Bengal tiger or an Arctic polar bear.”

“But this is different. She’s intelligent,” Elvis protested. “You saw the way she treated us in the kitchenette.”

Oh, what a turn of events, thought Bower. Previously, the appeal to reason had been her position during the truck ride. Back then it had been Elvis that had been warning of danger, now the roles were reversed. Thinking about it, she figured, having your arm rebuilt at a molecular level would probably melt your heart as well.

“Look, I think she’s intelligent too, but we need to be careful we don’t read our own thoughts and feelings into her actions or the consequences could be disastrous.”

Elvis pursed his lips in the soft light. Bower could see he was thinking carefully about his words, choosing his terms with precision. “She could have left me to die, but she didn’t. I think we owe her the benefit of doubt. We can’t leave her to die. I owe her my life.”

“I know,” Bower replied. “Believe me, I know. We’re all in this lifeboat together, fighting against the storm around us, but when that door opens, our world will change. She may come with us, but then again, she may not. She may not trust us. She might choose to strike out on her own. When that door opens, all bets are off.

“Like you, I’d like to see her come with us in the truck, but, honestly, I doubt she’ll go for it. You can lead a horse to water, you cannot make it drink.”

Elvis looked hurt. For all his tough exterior, he seemed fragile.

“There’s a gulf between us,” she said, clarifying her thinking further. “A void as big as that distance that separates our planets. It’s all too easy for us to interpret her actions as those of a human, but they’re not. Listen, I want her to be one of us, to be a good guy or whatever, but she’s not, she never will be. When she speaks she uses my voice but there’s no conversation. She’s mimicking me, that’s all,

copying me like a parrot."

Tears rolled down his cheeks.

"She's smarter than a parrot," Elvis said in rebuttal.

"I know. But just like a parrot, her physiology reinforces the differences between us. There's a chasm separating us, an impassible ocean. She can no more understand what it means to be human than we can understand what it means to be alien."

The tone in his voice stiffened.

"You're wrong, Doc. Maybe I can't describe what I'm feeling in scientific terms, maybe I am projecting my own feelings on her, but I never asked her to save my life. She did that herself. She chose to do good. I've got to believe there's more to her than some wild animal. You said it yourself in the truck, there's an intelligence there. And that's more than having the smarts to know two plus two is four or to fly between stars. She cares."

Bower breathed deeply, unsure how to respond to his emotive plea.

As if on cue, the alien creature rolled softly into view. Bower wondered what the alien had heard and how much it understood.

Elvis walked fearlessly toward the creature. There was a mutual affinity between them. They both reached out for each other. Bower watched as his fingers touched at the waving fronds. His hand skimmed across the tips as though he were running his fingers over a field of wheat.

The pulsating core of the creature hummed like an electrical substation. Bower was in two minds as to the alien's composition. It moved and acted so fluidly, as though it were an individual, and yet the tiny creatures at its heart suggested otherwise. She couldn't figure out which it was, but then, she realized, perhaps both models were wrong. Perhaps some other alien rationale held true and the creature, as she saw it, was more of a symbiotic whole.

The creature dwarfed Elvis, but that didn't appear to bother him. They both seemed to relish the soft touch.

The strength latent in the fronds was apparent. Being spherical, there were fronds drifting through the air above and beside the big man, but he held no fear of the creature.

"We're going to help her, right?"

At that point, Bower didn't feel she had any choice in the matter, regardless of how uneasy she felt. She was alarmed by the relationship between Elvis and the alien. As docile as tigers could be in captivity, there was always a very real danger of them turning on their trainers, regardless of how long a pair had worked together, and she felt his disregard for prudence was reckless. The possibility of a reactionary temperament hadn't occurred to him. Stella had dismembered Bosco

with ruthless efficiency. She could turn on either of them without warning, without any humanly intelligible reason. She could be using them, playing them. They could be a novelty, nothing more than a pet in this alien's mind.

Every instinct within Bower cried out, no, but she said, "Yes… We'll help her phone home."

Bower watched as the creature pulled Elvis closer, its dark, scarlet tentacles wrapping around his arm, enveloping him. He wasn't afraid, he was receptive, perhaps even enjoying the encounter. The alien towered several feet above him as its fronds enclosed his arm, reaching his shoulder, and yet still he showed no fear.

"Phone home?" Elvis said. "Do you understand? Home? Come with us. We'll help you get home."

"Home," the creature replied, but it hadn't mimicked his voice. The alien had retained Bower's distinct tone, duplicating both her soft pronunciation and her British accent. Bower found that even more perplexing. As long as she'd been the only one communicating with the creature it made sense that it duplicated her voice. But now, when it was clearly comfortable with Elvis, it still chose to retain her vocal persona. There was a complex dynamic at work, one Bower didn't understand, and that frightened her.

Bower recalled the term 'home' being used three times in his sentence, four times if she counted her initial use of the concept. The alien had simply repeated the most commonly used word back at them in mimicry. There was an assumption at play. How could they know what the creature had actually understood? Words were only ever meaningful in their context.

When Europeans first encountered primitive cultures, translating languages had been a painfully slow exercise, relying heavily on visual clues and comparisons. Translation efforts went on for years. None of that had happened with the alien. This could all be guesswork on the creature's part, nothing more than an intelligent guess as if playing along with the curious chimps. When the factory door opened, Bower thought the alien would bolt into the distance.

The creature released Elvis. Bower was curious as to who had initiated the separation, had Elvis pulled away or had the alien let go?

"Home, Stella," he said as the alien moved back into the shadows, staying just on the edge of their vision. "We're going to get you home."

Bower didn't even want to ask how Elvis proposed to do that. For now it was enough to escape their dungeon.

Time passed slowly.

Elvis stood watch, peering out into the night through a thin crack between the steel panels welded over the window. Bower watched the

alien as it appeared to preen itself. Tiny insects scooted up and down the fronds, pausing on occasion to focus on a particular part of a certain strand in much the same way as a cat would lick its fur and pause to rid itself of a parasite.

After awhile, Bower decided to try to talk with the alien. If they could converse, they could reason. If they could reason, there would be nothing to fear.

"How much do you understand?"

Sitting there on the edge of the mattress, looking at the seething mass of insect-like creatures pulsating at its core and the supple fronds swaying with the slightest breeze, Bower knew she was out of her depth. She'd been out of her depth long ago, ever since the Osprey lifted off, abandoning them in the village. Somehow she'd bluffed her way through until now, but she felt as though she were sinking in quicksand; one wrong move and she was dead.

"Do you know what I'm saying? Can you grasp our speech?"

The alien was silent.

What intelligence lay in that contradictory, vast nest full of so many tiny creatures? Was it one entity or thousands? Did it think? Did it feel? Certainly, she felt as though she'd seen fear within its actions, but that was probably her own fear being played out before her.

What senses did the alien or aliens have with which to interact with the world around them? How had they survived on Earth? In an environment that was surely hostile to them in some sense, either through chemistry, or pressure differences, or the strength of gravity. Did the spiny carriage offer any more than transport and weapons? Was it in some way analogous with an astronaut's spacesuit? Why hadn't any other alien creatures come looking for this one? Why hadn't they mounted a rescue mission? Had they assumed Stella was dead? Or was it that they didn't care?

"Just because someone is mute doesn't mean they don't understand," Elvis finally replied, cutting through the silence.

"Understand," the creature replied, again repeating the most common verb in a series of sentences, recognizing the topic if not the content. Bower could have kicked Elvis. If he'd remained silent, if the creature had replied with 'understand' having only heard the word once, then that would have been progress. As it was, she had no way of knowing if the alien was still just parroting concepts back at them.

"There has to be an intelligence at work here," Elvis continued. "We've seen too much to think otherwise. She's like a foreigner, like an American in Paris that can't speak French."

Bower caught a slight change in the throbbing hum of the insects and raised her hand, signaling for Elvis to be quiet.

"Intelligence," she said, addressing the creature. "Yes, we're

talking about your intelligence."

The creature was quiet.

After almost a minute, Elvis said, "Well, there are a few things we need Stella to understand if we're going to get her out of here. We need her to understand the basics of movement. We need her to respond to instructions. Let's see if we can get her to associate sounds with actions, kinda like the kids game, Red Light, Green Light."

Elvis beckoned for Bower to stand. She got to her feet, feeling a little silly.

Elvis moved back about ten feet and said to Bower, "Green light… Red light… Green light… Red light." With each phrase, Bower either walked forward or stood still. When she reached him, he turned to the imposing alien creature and asked a simple question with a single word, "Understand?"

The alien was silent.

"Again," he said, and Bower returned to the mattress. Elvis said, "Green light… Red light… Green light… Red light… Understand?"

"Understand," the alien replied, retaining Bower's voice.

"OK," Elvis said, turning to the creature. "Green light."

The spindly alien structure, some nine-feet in height, swayed as it rocked forward on its thin legs, rolling unnaturally toward him.

"Red light."

The words had barely left his lips when the creature froze.

"Green light."

Again the prickly orb moved forward. Elvis stood his ground, waiting until the last second before saying, "Red light." The creature was almost on top of him, its fronds waved just inches from his face.

"This is good," said Elvis. "We've taught her two key concepts; red and green, stop and go."

"We've taught her three concepts," Bower added. "We've also taught her understanding resolves into action."

On cue, the alien replied, "Understand."

"Can you see how it's doing that?" Bower asked. "How is it speaking?"

"It's the bugs on the upper surface," Elvis replied. "They're moving like an old speaker cone whenever she talks."

"Huh," Bower replied. Well, that explained why there were times when the alien's speech seemed to come from all around her. Unlike human speech, the alien's words were not directional, at least, not horizontally. The creature's words bounced off the ceiling back at her and so appeared to come from everywhere.

"We've got a couple of hours before we make our move," Elvis said. "We need to get that gun and work on loosening those hinges."

As the two of them got up, the alien swiveled in place, seemingly

asking for permission to join.

"Green light," said Elvis softly, and the creature followed behind them as they walked through the darkened floor.

For Bower, it felt unnerving to hear the creature quietly creeping up behind her. Unlike her own footsteps that fell with a soft, steady, rhythmic crunch, the motion of the alien was more akin to the sound of the wind rustling in the trees.

"Just like a puppy dog," said Elvis.

"A giant puppy dog… with tentacles," Bower replied.

Elvis didn't respond.

In the dim light she could see him grinning.

They reached the mattresses beneath the shattered remains of the upper floor. Elvis picked up the gun from where it lay in the dust.

"We need to find that bullet."

"Is one bullet going to make that much difference?" Bower asked, crouching down and searching with her hands in the low light. It was hopeless. She was clutching at shadows in the darkness.

"One bullet won't hold off an army, but could make the difference between life and death, it could buy us time."

The alien seemed agitated, and for a second Bower worried that seeing Elvis brandish the revolver had upset the interstellar creature. She looked up and amidst the swarm of tentacles flicking back and forth one remained still, stretching out toward Elvis. The fine tip of the frond was wrapped around a bloodstained bullet.

Elvis reached out cautiously, saying, "Nice work, Stella," and yet his voice was anything but confident. Like her, he had to be nervous about working with this creature. He took the bullet from her and slipped it into the revolver. Slowly, he tucked the revolver into the small of his back.

On reaching the door, Elvis used his fingers to carefully examine the hinges before setting to work with the butter-knife and the rock. The hallway was pitch black. The only light came from a faint glimmer breaking through cracks in the sealed window, where the alien stood casting shadows on the wall.

"Yeah, that's going to come loose real easy," Elvis whispered, turning to one side and leaning against the wall. Bower leaned against the other wall, facing him.

"And so we wait," he said.

Bower felt like pressing him to move sooner, but for him it must have been an ingrained military discipline to patiently await the appointed time for action. She had no doubt that when the time arose he could move with surprising speed and aggression. In the past twelve hours, he'd gone from almost an invalid to his old self. His left arm didn't look any different from this morning, it was still like that of

a child, but that didn't seem to bother him. He had what appeared to be a normal amount of dexterity.

The alien creature waited outside the narrow hallway. Bower wondered what it was thinking. The spiny structure spanned a sphere roughly nine feet in diameter, with the swarming heart of the creature centered at chest height. By retracting its tentacles the alien could squeeze into the hallway, but its motion was restricted.

Elvis took out the revolver and laid it on the ground beside them. In the darkness, Bower could just make out the grainy outline of the silver cylinder along with the elongated barrel of the gun but not the grip, as that seemed to fade into the indistinct darkness.

Elvis was doing something with some small stones. She could hear them falling softly to the ground but she couldn't see them. It took a few seconds before she realized he was amusing himself, tossing the stones beside his boot as part of some boredom-reducing game.

They sat there listening for any sounds beyond the door but the night was quiet. The concrete floor was hard. Her bum was sore. She had to keep moving from one cheek to another every few minutes. Elvis must have thought she had ants in her pants.

A cool breeze slipped beneath the door and Bower felt upbeat, but then she didn't have to worry about stealing a truck. She was content to think it would be easy for Elvis.

Every half-hour or so, Elvis would get up and check the angle of the moon shine through one of the cracks in the steel shutters out on the floor. Finally, he came back and said the two words she'd been waiting to hear, "It's time."

Stella spoke from the darkness.

"Understand."

# Chapter 13: Rush

Quietly, Elvis tapped at the hinges, removing them and putting them neatly to one side.

Whispering, he said, “There are a couple of danger points here, points at which our escape could be compromised. The first is when I remove this door.”

Bower had become so acclimatized to the darkness that her eyes easily picked out the soft gleam of polished steel as Elvis slipped the gun behind his back again.

“I’m going to remove the door, but once I do it’s important that you stay put. I need to assess the situation on the other side of the door. If there are any guards immediately outside, things are going to go hot very quickly. I won’t fire on them unless I’m forced to. I’ll use the knife to incapacitate them.”

“With a butter-knife?” Bower asked.

“You’d be surprised how effective any length of metal is when used with sufficient force in a vulnerable spot.”

Bower didn’t say anything, but she figured incapacitate was another military euphemism. The army had such clinical terms for killing people. And as for the butter knife, he was right. She’d seen people impaled in accidents on some of the most unlikely of objects: loose fencing, upturned chair legs, screwdrivers. During her time in the accident and emergency ward at the St Albans hospital in London, she’d had a dad turn up with a child’s toy airplane embedded in his abdomen. Soft tissue punctures were surprisingly nasty.

Elvis went on, saying, “At this point, stealth is our greatest ally: being dead has its advantages. But if bullets start flying, even just one shot, then the gig is up, it would be like hitting a wasp’s nest with a baseball bat.”

Elvis rested his hand on Bower’s shoulder. All she could see was the outline of his head in silhouette.

“If that happens, run, do you understand me?”

Bower nodded, not that he would have known.

“You run. You don’t look back. You don’t wait for me. You don’t stop and hide. You run as fast and as far as your legs will carry you. Do you understand? This is extremely important. Whatever happens, you treat that first shot like the starter’s gun at the Olympics. You don’t wait for any kind of confirmation from me. When that gun fires, you’re running a goddamn marathon. You bolt.

“Moving targets are bloody hard to hit, especially at night. You need to run like the hounds of hell are snapping at your heels. The further you run, the better.”

Bower breathed deeply, steeling her mind.

"In the initial rush of adrenalin you'll find you're good to sprint out to about a hundred yards, then your lungs will start to burn and your legs will feel like they're dragging lead weights. Back things off and pace yourself, but don't stop. Keep running. Don't stop running. If these bastards catch you they'll kill you. The only thing you can do is to outdistance them."

He removed his hand from her shoulder, saying, "The sun rises in the east. Government troops hold the western side of the city, so you want to head away from the rising sun."

Elvis paused before adding, "With any luck, I'll be running alongside you, OK?"

"OK."

"Are you ready?"

"Yes," Bower replied, feeling the adrenalin already pulsating through her veins.

"OK. I need you to help me with the door."

Elvis used the knife to slowly jimmy the door out of the metal doorframe. Pale moonlight seeped in through the cracks widening around the frame. Bower found herself holding her breath as she braced her hands against the door, helping Elvis move it slowly. She could see him positioning himself beside the hinged side of the frame, peering out into the backstreet. He was looking through the slowly widening gap.

Elvis lifted the door, pulling it back while turning sideways and squeezing through the narrow gap.

Bower took the weight of the door, stopping it from falling inward. She could see the revolver in his right hand, held high against the inside of the door. Once the gap was wide enough, Elvis stepped through, the gun leading the way. She went to follow, moving along the door to the gap only to see him holding his hand up, signaling for her to wait where she was.

"There's a crate to the left, hiding us from view, but it's also obscuring my view. Wait here while I check out the street."

Elvis crept forward in the shadows.

Bower peered through the gap. She could see down the street to the right. The surrounding buildings lacked windows. There were roller doors. They were in some kind of commercial area, which was no surprise.

In that instant, Bower suddenly realized her arms were the only thing holding the metal door. She'd stepped back and the door had started to fall inward, its weight seemed to grow as its center of gravity shifted. Bower braced herself, spreading her legs and pushing hard against the weight of the door, pushing it back until it was

vertical again.

Sweat dripped from her brow.

A steel door crashing to the ground would have attracted as much attention as a gunshot, and she found herself shaking in panic. Bower pushed the door past vertical, allowing it to lean up against the doorframe. Her fingers felt cold and clammy.

Elvis crept back and spoke to her from the other side of the door.

"We're clear. There's a light at the far end of the alley beside us, but nothing at either end of this back street. I can see down the alley beside the factory, there are a couple of guards down by the tankers, but they're pretty lax."

"Help me with the door," Bower said, starting to lift.

"Not just yet. I've got to get a truck first, remember."

"You're going to leave me?"

Bower was horrified.

"Here, you keep the gun," Elvis said, pushing the revolver into her hand.

"What?" Bower replied, taken back by the notion.

"If anyone springs you, pull back on the hammer and fire. Aim for the center of the chest. Squeeze with certainty. Don't jerk at the trigger."

"You can't leave me," Bower protested. She was leaning against the wall inside the hallway, her head poking through the gap while the rest of her body remained within the darkness.

"Listen. I need you to think straight. You, me and Stella creeping through the streets at night wouldn't end well. We'd attract too much attention. One man alone can move unseen. You've got to trust me on this. I will be back for you."

"But the gun?"

"If I get to the point where I need to open fire on someone, one bullet won't be enough."

Elvis pointed down the street. "If everything goes to plan, you should see a truck pull up down there. No headlights. I need you to stay tight until then, OK?"

"OK."

"Remember, if you hear gunfire nearby, you run, OK?"

"OK."

"If I'm not back within two hours, you move out on foot, OK?"

"OK."

"If you see the horizon lightening and sunrise approaching, you get the hell out of here, OK?"

"OK."

"And move away from the rising sun."

"OK."

“Everything’s going to be fine.”

“OK,” Bower replied yet again, although she was anything but convinced. Her face must have given away her doubts.

Elvis smiled, saying, “Hang in there, sweet lips.” And that brought a smile to her face, disarming her entirely. Sweet lips, she’d never been called that before, and she doubted she would ever be called that again. The novelty was refreshing in a way only Elvis could manage.

Elvis kept to the shadows, working his way down the road before disappearing around the corner. He never looked back. Bower would have felt better if he’d looked back. She slumped against the wall. Sitting there, she looked at the gun in her hands. The revolver felt so heavy, as though it knew it didn’t belong in her fingers and was trying to escape.

In the half-light, she could see the alien at the end of the hallway behind her. With all that transpired in the past few minutes, she’d forgotten about their interstellar friend. Tentacles waved in the darkness. That was when it struck her; the door was open. This is what the creature had been waiting for. What would it do now when freedom seemed so close at hand?

“Red light,” Bower said. “We need to wait here. We have to wait for Elvis.”

“Green light.”

Bower felt the fine hairs on the back of her neck stand on end.

“No. Red light, red light. It’s not safe, not yet.”

The alien advanced on her, pulling in its whip-like tentacles as it moved down the narrow hallway. Bower stood, facing the creature in the darkness.

“No, please, don’t.”

“Green light.”

“You don’t understand. If you go out there, they’ll find you. They’ll kill you.”

“Green light,” the creature repeated. Bower felt as though she was talking to herself. As her voice firmed, so did the alien’s mimicry.

Tentacles began striking the walls in anger, threatening violence. In the close confines, the writhing mass of fronds closed on her. She could hear the central mass of the creature humming, pulsating like a hive.

Bower held out one hand, signaling for the creature to halt.

“You’ve got to trust me. I want to get out of here as much as you do, but I can’t. It’s a red light for me too. You must wait. I am here with you. I won’t leave you. Red light, please understand. Red light.”

“Green light,” the creature replied, raising her own voice against her, almost on the verge of yelling. The thrashing tentacles began breaking through the particle-board lining the hallway. Before her, a

seething mesh of razor-sharp whips cut through the air barely a foot from her face.

Bower felt the grip of the revolver in her hands. Her fingers tightened on the handle. With her thumb, she pulled back on the hammer, cocking the gun.

"Green light," screamed the alien and she expected rebel soldiers to come bursting through the door behind her.

Bower trembled. She thought about raising the gun and threatening to shoot. That had worked in their initial interaction when Adan had cast them into his colosseum. The alien had responded by retreating and protecting its core. Would the alien respond the same way now? Or would the threat of violence destroy the trust they'd established? Did any such trust exist? Had it ever existed, or was it simply a construct of her own imagination?

Bower suspected a threat would work, but she couldn't bring herself to offer what would only ever be a hollow bluff. There had to be another way. Violence was cowardice, the petty refuge of a dull mind. She had to let the creature go. If the alien wanted to chance itself alone on the run, she had to respect that.

Her thumb gripped the hammer, slowly lowering it back in place against the firing pin of the bullet already set in the chamber of the revolver. As she did so the creature froze. Not one of the hundreds of tentacles threatening to strike moved. The various blades seized in midair, regardless of the contorted shape in which they were held. For a moment, it was as though Bower was looking at a modern art sculpture.

With her heart pounding in her chest, perspiration breaking out on her forehead and her fingers shaking, Bower tried to stand still. She was aware that the creature had only just realized she was holding the loaded gun.

Bower bent down slowly, placing the gun on the ground, keeping her eyes on the pulsating mass at the heart of the convoluted creature. The tentacles remained stationary, locked in place, and she wondered what the hell this intelligent being from another world was thinking.

"Green light," she said softly, stepping to one side, hoping the alien could squeeze past her. She had no doubt the alien's tentacles could manipulate the door and move it out of the way. She only hoped the door didn't crash to the concrete floor.

There was silence for the best part of a minute. Sweat ran from her forehead, stinging her eyes, but she fought the urge to react and wipe them. Sudden movements didn't seem wise. Bower pressed her back against the wall, trying to give the alien as much room as possible, but she refused to step outside the door. She was stubborn and she knew it, but she believed in Elvis. She believed he knew what

he was doing, and this was the only way she could conceivably communicate that to this strange alien intelligence.

Still the alien remained motionless, barely half a foot away from the gun lying on the concrete, and Bower found herself wondering what it was thinking. Was the alien looking at the gun? Was it looking at her? Perhaps seeing her in far more than the visible spectrum, which was so woefully inadequate in the dark. Could it sense her heartbeat? Could it measure her body heat, or the rush of adrenalin signaling a flight or fight response? Did it understand how unbearable it was for her to do neither? Outwardly, the creature may have seemed inert, but she doubted that was true of its inner reasoning. Bower felt as though Stella was reading her mind.

Finally, the creature replied, saying, “Red light.”

Bower breathed a sigh of relief. The muscles of her body, so tense just moments before, relaxed. At the same time, the fronds and blades of the creature flexed and sagged. Bower was surprised by the parallels between them.

What point of logic had convinced the alien to wait?

In that instance, Bower got a glimpse of its thinking. Like her, the creature must have been subject to a raft of emotions. Like her, the alien had to choose whether to blindly follow instinct or to think critically. And like her, this otherworldly mind had to rise above its own fears and doubts.

Relieved, she sank to the ground, her back against the wall.

Bower hadn’t really thought about what the alien creature was going to do next, only that it wasn’t going to proceed out the door. She assumed the creature would back away again and keep its distance, but it didn’t. In the darkness, Bower felt tentacles touching her shoulder, only they weren’t probing or glancing over her, they were resting limply on her arm and thigh as she sat there. Bower reached out with her other hand, resting her fingers on the thick, leathery appendages. Tiny insects streamed back and forth, barely touching her before retreating again.

“I know,” she said. “Oh, how I know, but we have to be brave. For now, it’s a red light. Elvis will come back for us, I know he will, and then we will have a green light.”

The alien never responded.

Sitting there, she could feel a pulse running through the limp frond resting on her leg. Unlike a human heart, the alien creature pulsated like the chatter and stutter of a water pipe with air in the line.

Bower sat there by the door, peering down the road, hoping, almost willing for Elvis to appear, while dreading the awful implications of a violent gunshot breaking the still of night.

What would the alien do if it heard a gunshot close by? Bower had already picked out her escape route, a dark alley leading away from the factory on the other side of the back road. She wasn't sure if it was heading west, but if they were sprung she figured she needed to get some distance between her and the soldiers around the factory. Anywhere that led away from the guardhouse on the main street seemed like a good idea. What would this interstellar creature do if it saw her running from the factory? Would it follow?

Minutes seemed like hours.

After an age, Bower noticed the sky lightening ever so slightly. What had been a deep Prussian blue, a skyline as dark as coal, slowly warmed. Stars began to fade. The sky on the horizon revealed a growing sense of color pushing back the black of night. There was still an hour or so before dawn broke, but Bower's heart sank. She was alone. It was time to go.

Turning to the creature, Bower's heart broke as she said, "Green light."

To her surprise, the alien seemed lethargic. The creature registered her words, but it took time for it to respond and stiffen its spiky tentacle-like legs. Could Stella have been asleep? Thinking about it, she realized every animal on Earth slept at some point, some of them had a shallow sleep, but they still had a distinct, cyclical metabolic change regardless. Some, like dolphins, had the ability to shut down one hemisphere of their brains at a time in a bizarre form of half-sleep, but every animal slept, recharging its neural batteries. And yet, Bower reasoned, she could be reading her own exhaustion into the creature's behavior. Perhaps the alien was lost in thought. As for her, she'd have loved nothing more than to curl up in a soft bed. The thought of running madly for her life was daunting, but it had to be done.

She got to her feet, leaving the gun on the floor, and began heaving the door to one side. When she turned to grab the revolver it was gone. She looked up and saw the creature holding the gun by the barrel, a tentacle wrapped around the shiny steel. Bower reached out and took the gun cautiously from the alien.

"Green light," she repeated softly. She knew this was the command the creature had been waiting for, but even it seemed reluctant, as though it too were longing for Elvis to return.

What would happen to them on the run? How far would she get through this gun-ravaged city? Once people started moving around, how far could she go with an alien following her? Should she hide? Elvis said not to hide, but her instinct told her she should crawl into some dark hole. Who should she trust? Her judgment or his?

And Stella, the alien had trusted her, but what did Bower have to

repay that trust? They would have been better off being on the move several hours ago, putting more distance between them and the rebels. Would the creature realize that and feel betrayed? Elvis hadn't returned. She had to strike out on her own with Stella, with just one bullet to protect them, with just one bullet to attract hordes of rebel soldiers. Bower wanted to say she was sorry, to apologize to the alien in advance, but the creature would have had no idea what she was talking about.

As Bower moved out of the doorway and into the shadow of a large wooden crate, she saw a covered truck pull up at the end of the road with its lights off. Her heart leaped. Elvis climbed out of the cab and opened the back of the truck.

"Green light," she said softly to Stella, beckoning the creature outside.

Multiple alien fronds picked up the door, manipulating it as the creature passed through the doorway, leaving the door leaning in place behind it. At a glance, it would look like the door was still closed. Clever girl, thought Bower.

Bower peered around the side of the crate, looking to see if anyone was further along the back road. Once she was sure no one was watching, she darted down the rough gravel road. Stella kept pace beside her, rolling forward on her spindle-like legs. The alien creature moved swiftly and silently beside her. Bower got the impression Stella could have easily outpaced her, but the alien remained at her side over the hundred yards or so it took to reach the truck.

Elvis was standing in the open back of the truck, waving with his hands, urging them on. The alien sprang up, landing in the cargo deck. Elvis began pulling down a canvas cover to hide her from view when Bower climbed up as well.

"You don't want to ride up front?"

"No," she replied, struggling to catch her breath. "I need to be with her. To let her know everything's going to be OK. As scared as we are of her, I suspect she's more terrified of us. She needs someone with her."

Elvis nodded. "Hey, I got through to a Government checkpoint on the shortwave radio in the truck. They said the Americans are holed up at the US embassy. I think they mean the Rangers, so that's where we'll head."

Bower reached out, touching at the thick blood seeping through his shirt, running from his shoulder down his front.

"You're bleeding."

"It's not my blood," Elvis replied with a grin.

How he could respond like that, she didn't know. For her, there

was nothing laudable in the violence of war, and yet she was glad he could disconnect himself in this way. His casual disregard had to be some kind of psychological defense mechanism, insulating his mind from the horrors he had to inflict to survive. One day it would catch up with him. One day these memories would haunt him, and she knew it. Although his acts were justifiable, they were odious nonetheless. Post-traumatic stress wasn't cowardice. There was only so long a sane man could maintain the illusion of detachment necessary to survive a war-zone. When his fall came, she hoped it wasn't from a great height. She hoped there was someone there to catch him.

# Chapter 14: Embassy

The alien creature wrapped its tentacles around the wooden slats in the back corner of the truck, holding on as Elvis sped through the darkened streets. Bower sat to one side, bracing herself as the vehicle careened one way and then another. Elvis had a lead foot, both when accelerating and braking.

The canvas cover at the back of the truck flapped in the breeze, allowing the growing dawn to seep through. The sky was a dark shade of blue. Streaks of scarlet lit up clouds high in the sky, slowly transforming the night into a ruddy pink morning. With just a few clouds in the stratosphere, it was going to be another scorching hot day.

Bower sat there across from Stella wondering what she was thinking. As for herself, Bower was regretting not sitting in the cab with Elvis. Her heart pounded in her chest. There were times when the truck felt like it was out of control, careening around corners, bouncing out of potholes. Her life was out of control. In that moment, the truck became symbolic of all she'd been through over the past week, a roller-coaster ride without any brakes. She wanted to stop. She wanted to yell out to Elvis and tell him to stop the truck and let her out, but she knew her feelings were misplaced. Getting out of the truck wouldn't solve anything. She had to be strong and endure. Looking at Stella, she knew she shouldn't read her own emotions into the alien's character, but she couldn't help but think Stella felt the same way. The pulsating mass of tiny creatures at the heart of the alien appeared to grimace the same way she did with each erratic turn.

Elvis stopped the truck on several occasions, and Bower could hear him talking to Africans. As he drove away, she got glimpses of the various roadblocks they were negotiating.

Bower felt she was going to be sick. Fumes leaked in the back of the truck. The unrelenting flap of the canvas seemed to pound inside her head. In the growing heat, the sides of the truck seemed to close in on her, causing her to feel claustrophobic, nauseous. Her world narrowed and she fought not to vomit.

Finally, the truck slowed and turned sharply, as though they were entering a property rather than turning on another road. Bower could hear voices calling out, American voices. The truck rode up over the lip of a curb, its engine whining. She could hear Smithy and Jameson calling out to Elvis. Her heart jumped.

"Goddamn," Jameson cried.

"You son of a bitch," yelled Smithy.

Bower felt the cab of the truck rock as someone jumped up onto the running board below the driver's door.

"Hey, babe," Elvis said in his best Barry White voice.

"Don't you hey babe me," Smithy replied, trying not to laugh. "Scare me like that again and I'll hunt you down and kill you myself."

Elvis laughed.

Bower wondered how much Stella understood of their speech. Certainly, a figurative, idiomatic phrase like that must have been confusing. She wasn't sure, but she swore she could hear Smithy kissing Elvis on the cheek as he drove slowly forward. Bower figured it was good Stella couldn't see Smithy and Elvis as their contradictory verbal banter and physical expression would have been confusing.

Bower started moving toward the rear of the truck, wanting to get out of the stinking, hot, claustrophobic space. For a moment, she forgot about Stella, thinking only of her sense of relief to be safe in the presence of the Rangers again.

"Where is Bosco and the Doc?" Jameson called out.

"Bosco didn't make it," Elvis replied, his voice breaking. "Doc's in the back."

The truck turned in a semi-circle before coming to a halt. Pebbles crunched beneath the tires. Bower sat by the tailgate, ready to climb down.

"What the hell happened to your arm?" Jameson asked as he and Smithy walked with Elvis toward the rear of the old truck. Bower was somewhat awkwardly trying to climb over the lip of the tray running across the back of the truck.

"Oh, you think that's wild, wait until you get a load of our guest."

Jameson came around the back of the truck and, to Bower's surprise, grabbed her like she weighed next to nothing. He swung her down from the truck, giving her what amounted to a bear hug.

"Liz," he cried. "Damn, it is good to see you."

Bower never was one for being touchie-feelie, but she was relieved to see him too. He kissed her on the lips, which took her off-guard. There was nothing sexual about it, perhaps it was the classic American GI in him, the liberation of Paris all over again. Her mind was awash with emotions. She was surprised by how heady she felt as he let go of her and she stood there in the bright sunlight.

Bower squinted. Colors rushed at her from all directions.

An American flag flew on a flagpole in the center of the courtyard. The truck had driven around a circular driveway, around an oval with green grass growing sedately in a carefully manicured lawn.

Green.

She'd seen greens in the jungle several days before, but they were

deep greens. After days of darkness, the vibrant, spring greens of the grass lawn were astonishing. Small sprinkler heads sat recessed every ten to fifteen feet around the curb, ready to spray water over the lawn. And there were flowers around the base of the flag pole. Were there any other flowers anywhere within Lilongwe? Bower felt like she'd fallen down the rabbit hole and tumbled into Wonderland.

To one side, over against the high outer walls of the embassy, palm trees and shrubs marked the start of a tropical garden. It would have been aesthetically pleasing were it not for the black soot scattered along the cream wall, the bullet holes and the odd spray of dried blood. Like everything she'd seen in Africa, the US embassy was a violent contradiction.

Smithy was glowing. Her smile revealed her beautiful, straight white teeth. She punched Elvis gently on the chest.

"You had us worried," she said, unable to wipe the grin off her face.

"So what happened to you guys back there in the intersection?" Jameson asked. "We had Tangos all over us. Fought a rolling action and made out a back alley carrying our wounded.

"We've been sending daily recons out to the market, hoping you'd drag your sorry ass there. If the natives knew anything, they weren't talking."

Elvis had climbed up on the back of the truck. As he rolled the canvas to one side he said, "We were captured by a warlord, some egomaniac by the name of General Adan. He—"

Jameson peered into the back of the truck, cutting Elvis off before he could finish his sentence.

"What the fuck?" he cried, stepping backwards. "What the hell is that?"

Smithy backed away.

"Sarge," Elvis began. "I'd like to introduce you to a friend of ours, Stella."

Stella stayed away from the light streaming in through the open canvas. The alien moved across the back of the truck.

Elvis stood there beckoning the creature, coaxing her forward.

"Jesus, Mary and Joseph," Smithy cried. "Elvis, what have you done?"

Elvis laughed. "Green light, Stella. It's OK. Green light."

Slowly, the seething mass of tentacles and whips moved forward. As the alien creature approached the back of the truck, Bower expected Elvis to jump down and get out of the way, but he didn't. To Bower, working with Stella was a bit like being a lion-tamer: you kept a whip and chair in hand at all times, but Elvis held no fear of the strange-looking creature.

Jameson backed across the grass, moving away from the back of the truck.

"Mother of God," he whispered.

Bower could see his hand instinctively resting on his sidearm. "Don't," she said, resting her hand on his. "That really wouldn't be a good idea."

Looking back at the truck, Bower got her first good look at the creature in the bright sunlight. The brilliant reds and scarlets of the alien's tentacles were shocking to behold. They shone like polished glass, reflecting the light around them. As the alien fronds waved in the breeze they seemed to be sampling the air. Stella was trying to assess how safe it was outside the truck.

"Green light," Bower said, reinforcing what Elvis had said.

Bower watched as slick red blades wrapped around Elvis. He was completely unfazed by the creature, and from the look on Jameson's face that was shocking to behold. Smithy held her hand over her mouth.

The swarm of insects at the heart of the alien had an iridescent pearly sheen to their black shells. Although Bower knew they were a mass of individual insect-like creatures, in the sunlight they looked like the folds and crevasses of the cerebral cortex, a brain in motion, vulnerable and exposed to the elements.

Up until this point, Bower had thought of the brilliant red appendages reaching out from the core as tentacles, but in the light of day they looked more like brightly-colored blades of flax, only that analogy was too organic, perhaps flexible blades of colored steel or fiberglass would have been a better description. To her surprise, as they flexed they changed not only their length, but their width and thickness, adapting themselves from fine, feeler-like structures to blades that swayed like ribbons in the breeze. Stiff spikes supported the creature's weight, stabbing back and forth like crab's feet.

Elvis stepped down, helping the alien out of the truck.

Soft red blades enveloped the right side of his body, wrapping around him as though the creature were clinging to him more for security than anything else.

As nervous as Jameson was, Bower could see the alien was even more apprehensive. Having been harassed, corralled, fired upon, injured and threatened during its fleeting time on Earth, Stella must have felt Elvis was the only native she could trust. The only one for whom trust was mutual. Even Bower couldn't let her guard down completely with the alien creature, but Elvis had no reservations.

Bower hoped Elvis remembered her warning, not to read too much from his own emotional responses into the reactions of the alien, and yet he clearly felt the need to protect Stella. Perhaps it was

the change of environment. In their dark, gloomy dungeon, the factory floor felt like her domain. Out here, she was on his turf.

An eerie silence fell over the courtyard. Smithy crouched down, her hand still over her mouth. Like the other soldiers, she was in shock.

“Green light,” Elvis said.

“Green light,” the creature replied, still using Bower’s voice. Was that a play to be inclusive of her, Bower wondered, or was the creature simply being consistent? Regardless, Bower walked over beside the alien as naturally as she could. Despite her reservations, she wanted to show the other soldiers there was nothing to fear.

Jameson looked at Bower as the alien’s tone of voice registered with him. The shock on his face was palpable. Bower raised her hands in a gesture that indicated she had no more idea about all this than he did.

The various US soldiers around the courtyard nervously checked their surroundings, clearly thinking about any possible hostile move. For all they knew, this creature was some invincible, acid-dripping monster from another planet, and they weren’t too far from the truth, thought Bower.

Jameson, though, ever the professional, seized the moment and called out.

“All right, enough standing around. What’s the matter? Haven’t you seen an alien before? Smithy, get that gate shut. Jones, Marshall and Davies, if you’re on the wall pulling guard duty you need to face the other way. And Elvis… Stop showing off and take our guest inside.”

Elvis grinned. “Yes, sir.”

Smithy didn’t move. Jameson tapped her on the shoulder. Slowly, she got up and went over to the gate.

Elvis walked toward the main building. Stella followed. She was never more than a few feet from him. It was clear she wasn’t going to let him out of her sight until she felt safe. Bower followed them.

“You three,” Jameson said, coming up behind them and speaking with gravitas. “You have some explaining to do.”

Well, thought Bower, Jameson took that quite well, all things considered. And she loved his use of three, as though somehow the alien owed him an explanation. In reality, it was only Elvis that was answerable to Jameson, but that didn’t bother him in the slightest. She turned back, expecting a grumpy look on his face but he was grinning as he came up beside her.

Jameson shook his head, saying, “If it was going to be anyone, it would be Elvis.” That made Bower laugh. He was right. Was there anyone better suited to introduce Earth’s culture to an alien species

than Elvis?

As they climbed the broad marble steps leading up to the portico in front of the embassy, Bower watched to see how Stella negotiated this as an obstacle. Her spindly feet, so reminiscent of a sea urchin, made a smooth transition from sharp, pointed spears to curved blades with some flex in them. They slapped the ground softly, wrapping themselves over the uneven surfaces, providing her with some spring in her step.

Bullet holes marred the walls. Burns and scorch marks spoke of a violent struggle. Patches of dried blood on one of the low walls indicating where the wounded took cover during the vicious firefight.

Jameson caught up with Elvis, directing him to one side. He was surprisingly relaxed given their unusual company.

“Why couldn’t you have brought home a cat or a dog like everyone else?”

Elvis laughed.

“What the hell am I supposed to do with an alien, Elvis? Honestly, do you think about these things before you do them? Shit, can you imagine the paperwork?”

And they both laughed.

Bower wasn’t too familiar with the various branches within the US military, but she could tell several of the soldiers staring nervously at them were either navy or air force from their blue uniforms.

“At ease, gentlemen” Jameson said, and it took Bower a second or two to realize he was joking. It was Elvis and his cocky smile that gave it away.

They entered the reception area and walked down a long corridor. The white pristine walls had fresh gouges and the odd bloodstain on them. Jameson led the way, with Elvis following him with the creature immediately behind. Bower brought up the rear with two rather awkward soldiers providing what she figured was security. They were carrying M4 rifles slung over their shoulders and weren’t in anyway threatening.

Jameson led them into a cafeteria. The tables and chairs had been used to barricade one end of the room overlooking the courtyard. A couple of the tables had been put back on the barren linoleum, but most of them still lay in chaos by the windows. Jameson gestured to the table and chairs.

“Lieutenant McCallister is on his way,” one of the trailing soldiers said, standing guard by the door.

“Well, he’s going to love this,” Jameson replied.

Stella wheeled around the room as Elvis and Bower sat at the table. She was inquisitive. Bower could see her probing overturned chairs, and the shattered remains of a vending machine with cans of

coke and candy bars strewn across the ground, but she was most interested in the serving benches with their stainless steel tops.

There were two jugs full of water on the table, along with a bunch of paper cups.

"No coffee, I'm afraid," Jameson said, pouring water into the cups and handing them to Elvis and Bower. "Are you hungry? Can we get you some food?"

Bower nodded, drinking the water quickly and getting a refill.

One of the soldiers by the door slipped carefully along the wall and into the kitchen to get them something to eat.

"And what about our friend?" Jameson asked. Bower noted that Jameson kept the table between him and the alien as the creature moved around the room. Bower and Elvis were content to sit there comfortably with the alien rummaging around the cafeteria, Jameson was still unnerved by her and didn't sit down until Stella settled.

"She likes water," Bower said, trying to be helpful.

Elvis took the glass jug over to the creature. He placed it on the stainless steel bench, saying, "Are you thirsty?"

The creature stopped and began examining the jug. Bower was fascinated to watch as a stream of bugs raced up and down the red blades touching briefly at the jug. Before her eyes, the glass jug appeared to dissolve from the top down as the creature assimilated both the glass and the water at once.

"Well, she liked that," Elvis said, laughing as he sat down again. He turned to a soldier standing by the kitchen and said, "Same again, bartender."

Elvis turned his chair around so he could straddle the seat as he leaned on the chair back watching the alien. He was mesmerized by Stella.

A young lieutenant walked in and froze in the doorway. Instantly, the alien bristled, all its appendages stiffening like swords and spikes.

"Easy, girl," Elvis said in a soft voice. "It's OK. We're safe. We're among friends."

Whether the alien understood his words or just the tone of his voice, Bower wasn't sure, but Stella relaxed and went back to examining the serving line. She was opening drawers and cupboards, just as Bower had seen her do on the factory floor.

"It's OK, Frank. Just don't make any sudden moves," Jameson said.

"Is that… Is that…"

"Yep," Jameson replied. "Apparently it is."

The young officer never took his eyes of the alien. He moved cautiously, slowly stepping over to the far side of the table next to Jameson.

“Are you sure this is safe?” he asked quietly.

Elvis smiled, saying, “If you don’t shoot at her, she won’t tear your arms out of their sockets.”

Bower wasn’t sure that helped.

“We’ve got to call this through,” the lieutenant said. “Command is not going to believe this.”

“So what happened back there?” Jameson asked. Bower could see him looking intently at Elvis and his withered arm.

“We were overrun,” Elvis began. “I lost my arm while sheltering from an RPG. Stella gave me a new one.”

“So, what?” Jameson asked. “She carries spares?”

Elvis laughed, gesturing to his elbow as he said, “It was a bloody mess. Somehow, she regrew my arm. I don’t know how.”

Elvis looked to Bower.

“I saw it, but I can’t explain it,” she said, somewhat lost for words.

“From there,” Elvis continued. “I hot-wired a truck and we came here.”

Jameson scratched the side of his head. Bower could see the look on his face. He must have known Elvis was compressing an inordinate amount of detail into just a few words, but he let that slide. He was clearly impressed. Having an alien before them was just too fantastic. There would be time for a proper debrief at some point, but not here, not now.

“And Bosco?” Jameson asked.

“They killed him,” Elvis replied, cutting in rapidly before Bower could say anything, not that she would have.

On one level, it was a lie, Bower knew that, and yet Elvis was right to blame the warlord. It may have been Stella that carried out the sentence, but the sentence had been passed by Adan and his men. Elvis wasn’t being forthcoming, and Bower understood why, he was protecting Stella. Given the creature’s menacing, threatening appearance, the last thing anyone needed to hear was that she’d shredded a US Ranger in barely a second. And yet Bower couldn’t leave the details so scant. She was determined to say more while being careful not to implicate Stella.

“Adan captured us,” she said, and Elvis shot a fierce look at her, clearly wanting her to shut up. “They murdered Bosco in front of us. He never stood a chance.”

“And the alien?” Jameson asked.

The lieutenant sat down next to Jameson. Bower could see the glazed look in his eyes. He might not be up to logically resolving the various aspects of this puzzle, but Jameson was.

“They threw us in with Stella. We don’t know where she came

from or how they captured her, but she was there when we got there, trapped on the ground floor of an abandoned factory."

"And Adan captured her?" Jameson asked, pulling at the threads of the story. "You're sure of that?"

"Yes," Bower replied.

"So you saw Adan alive?"

"Yes."

Elvis had his lips clenched.

"Do you know how or when Adan died?"

Bower shook her head.

"We heard he was killed by a woman, a foreigner."

Bower looked down, avoiding eye contact with Jameson. She was afraid if she explained her part in Adan's death she'd inadvertently give away Stella's part in Bosco's death.

Jameson wasn't satisfied, the tone of his voice revealed that, but the lieutenant was as he smiled, saying, "Well, it's exceptional work. You've escaped in the confusion surrounding the general's death, and you've freed an alien. God knows what we're going to do with… her, but you did the right thing, and that is to be commended."

The soldier returned from the kitchen carrying a plate with several packages of food wrapped in foil. Like Jameson and the lieutenant, he approached the table so as to keep the flimsy structure between him and the alien. You have no idea how fast she can move, Bower thought, but she didn't want to spook them so she remained silent. If they felt safe approaching from that direction, all well and good.

"Is there anything I can get for…" the soldier asked, his sentence trailing to a stop midway.

"Another jug of water," Elvis replied.

Bower was fascinated by the presumption with which Elvis treated Stella. They had no way of knowing what Stella needed. Another jug of water was a good guess, but it was only a guess. And yet that could have been like a Mars Bar for the alien creature; hardly something that would provide any real nourishment. Bower doubted Stella could make use of terrestrial proteins. Perhaps raw materials like water and the silica in glass were best, but they really needed Stella to tell them what she needed.

"OK," Jameson said. "Well, it's damn good to have the two of you back, even if you have brought home a stray. McCallister and I are going to have to call this through.

"I'd like to ask you to stay here. You're not under arrest, but I'd rather the three of you didn't go wandering around. There are toilets over there, and we'll get you anything you need, but for now, just stay put while we figure out what to do from here."

“Roger, that,” Elvis replied.

“OK,” Bower said, feeling it was important to respond for herself.

Jameson and McCallister got up cautiously, taking pains not to scrape their chairs on the linoleum and make any excessive noise. Stella appeared to ignore them. As they left, Bower could hear them talking excitedly to each other in the hallway.

For her part, Stella had found a potted plant, an indoor palm no more than two feet high. Extraterrestrial bugs ran along Stella’s outstretched arms, examining the leaves, trunk, soil and the pot itself. She seemed particularly interested in the soil.

Bower poked at the food packets on the table.

“What is this?”

“They’re MREs,” Elvis replied. “Meals Ready to Eat.”

As unappealing as they looked, Bower was past caring. She tore one open and began eating something that tasted vaguely like corned beef and sweet corn mixed with a limp, leafy green vegetable that had long since lost its green. Whether it was spinach or okra, it tasted precisely how it looked, disgusting. Truth be told, Bower was aware that taste was a function of expectations, both in terms of sight and smell before the tongue ever savored any flavor, but she couldn’t see this pre-cooked meal as desirable for anything other than the raw consumption of calories.

Elvis tossed one of the MREs across the floor toward Stella. The package slid over next to the palm. The alien probed the plastic, tearing it open and examining the contents for a few seconds before turning back to the palm.

“Well, what do you know,” Elvis said to Bower. “MREs are now MRAs, Meals-Rejected-by-Aliens.”

He laughed, taking a bite out of something that looked distinctly like compressed cardboard.

# Chapter 15: Evac

Time dragged.

Elvis fell asleep.

Bower wasn't sure how he could sleep sitting on a chair, but he was resting his head on his elbow propped up on the table. His feet were up on another chair and he seemed comfortable enough.

Bower watched Stella.

The alien had found a spider's web in the corner. With a deft touch, she examined the silk threads of its web, observing how the spider responded to various vibrations. Flies buzzed around, Stella caught one with her lightning reflexes, catching it between two pincer-like ends of her scarlet-red fronds. She held the fly gently, so much so the insect continued to beat its wings, trying to pull away. From her core, extraterrestrial insects streamed upward toward the fly, examining what, Bower wasn't sure, but they were busy. After a few minutes, Stella placed the fly in the spider's web and watched as the arachnoid scurried over and enveloped the fly in silk. At least, 'watched' was the best verb Bower could think of to describe the six or seven blades poised around the web, each with an extraterrestrial beetle at its tip, somehow observing what was going on.

There was a newspaper rack by the door. Bower picked up a glossy magazine adorned with images of the latest bimbo gaining her fifteen minutes of fame.

"Forgive me," she said, placing the open magazine on the floor next to Stella. "Don't look too closely at the content, but this is how we communicate in written form, with words and pictures."

For the first time, Bower realized the creature was multitasking, and not in the swiftly switching manner that humans would multitask, giving only fleeting attention to several different things in rapid succession. The vast swirling arms on the creature continued their observation of the palm at one level, the spider on another, while several thin blades began examining the magazine.

Bower stepped back, wanting to observe how curious the alien was about the contents of the magazine and its compressed, two-dimensional images of three-dimensional people and nature scenes. The creature picked up the magazine with the tips of its fronds, making Bower wonder quite how it achieved such gecko-like grip.

Stella examined the magazine, but she was more interested in the media than the content. She probed the thickness of the paper, the binding on the spine, the dimensions of the page, but she only flicked through a couple of pages before putting the magazine down.

"I know how you feel," Bower said, sitting back down at the table

and staring at the alien creature.

Stella split open several of the palm leaves, but not vertically as a human would cut through a leaf, she split them sideways, cleanly separating the upper and lower faces of the leaves with surgical precision.

A swarm of insects at her heart moved in a stream out to her extremities. Whether they were simply all taking a look or retrieving samples for some kind of analysis back at the core of the creature, Bower wasn't sure, but she got the impression Stella was in her element. The alien was content to examine a level of biology most humans would walk past without a second thought.

Bower was tired.

She rested her arms on the table, crossing them and resting her head on the soft muscle of her forearm. For a few minutes, she stared lazily at the astonishing creature with its brilliant red fronds reflecting the light around it, and its inner core a hive of activity. Slowly, she drifted off to sleep.

When she awoke, she woke with a rush.

Bower recognized the roar around her immediately. Fighter jets were blazing past somewhere overhead.

"Hey," Elvis said, seeing she was awake.

Bower sat up.

Her neck was sore, but she was surprised to find her head had been resting on a pillow. Someone had seen her sleeping and slipped a pillow beneath her. Bower wiped some saliva away from the corner of her lips. She'd been dribbling in her sleep, and that made her feel embarrassed. There was a slight, damp mark on the pillow, but Elvis didn't seem to notice, or perhaps he just didn't care.

The angle of the sun had changed. The shadows that had been so long in the early morning, now cut back at a sharp angle. The day was hot. Fans turned on the ceiling, circulating the air but bringing no relief. It had to be about one or two in the afternoon.

"Sleep well?" Elvis asked.

"Like a rock," Bower replied. "Hard and uncomfortable."

Elvis smiled.

He'd changed into a white singlet, leaving his blood-encrusted jungle shirt hanging over one of the chairs. A nice, neatly ironed shirt lay on the table next to him, but in the heat of the day he hadn't put it on.

Although Elvis didn't have sunglasses, he had slicked back his hair, having shaved to give his face a clean-cut look with sharply defined sideburns. Elvis was back. Sure, his arm still looked anemic and stunted, but he was as cocky as the first day she'd met him. Had he used water or vegetable oil from the kitchen, she wondered,

looking at his neatly combed hair. Oil would last longer but would attract dust. It had to be water, she figured, either way, the rock-god was ready to go on stage.

Several rows of plants lined one of the walls and the bench-top. They hadn't been there when Bower fell asleep. There were more palms, ferns, flowering Gerbera, daisies and orchids, every plant that spoke of somewhere other than Africa, plants that would only ever be found within an embassy in the sun-scorched country that was Malawi.

"They must have figured she likes botany," Bower said.

"I guess so. I was asleep. Stella seems to like flowers. They keep her amused."

Dirt had been tipped out on the floor and piled up neatly, like sand having run through an hourglass. Several of the plants were lying on the ground, their roots exposed to the air, and still Stella seemed enthralled by the diversity.

"Looks like she's been having fun," Bower said, trying to suppress a yawn.

"They brought you a change of clothes," Elvis said, gesturing to a set of Army fatigues and a towel sitting on the table. The clothes were not only clean, they'd been ironed. Bower picked them up; a shirt, trousers, a nice new leather belt, a pair of white socks and some underwear. No bra, though, but that was no surprise as sizing wasn't generic. The underwear didn't look too flattering, but they were as white as new fallen snow.

Bower went to the bathroom. She was surprisingly stiff and sore. She used a hand towel to wash at the basin. After changing, she took some time to wash water over her face and through her hair. When she came out, Elvis was eating a candy bar. He offered her one.

"Chocolate's melted, but if you're looking for a sugar-hit, they're not too bad."

Bower took the candy bar, saying, "Thanks." She didn't recognize the brand, but she was sure it wasn't supposed to be so limp and mushy. Peeling back the wrapper, she struggled not to make a mess as she ate. Bower ended up licking her fingers and placed the grotesque-looking wrapper in one of the paper cups.

The sound of helicopters grew closer.

Bower stood and moved over by the broken windows. As she stared out across the city, a flight of four F-18s banked hard to one side above the horizon, their engines roared as they soared low over the city. Explosions rumbled through the air. Smoke drifted upwards. A few seconds later the ground shook.

Jameson walked in.

The sound of helicopters passing overhead shook the building.

The alien bristled.

"Easy, girl," Elvis said, and Stella visibly relaxed. Whatever connection the creature held with Elvis, its trust was resolute. Although the thump of rotor blades continued to beat at the air, the creature went back to comparing flowers. Troops slid down fast ropes thrown out of the helicopters, dropping onto the rooftops surrounding the embassy.

Elvis walked over and stood by Bower near the window.

"What's going on, Sarge? Those aren't US choppers. And those planes, they're not carrying US markings."

"South African Defense Force," Jameson replied.

"I thought the UN had pulled out of Malawi," Bower said.

"They had. That was, until they realized the only alien left on the planet was sheltering in the US embassy in Malawi."

"I don't understand," Bower replied. "What's happened?"

"The mothership has returned to its original position near the Moon. From what we can tell, they're preparing to leave. Look, from what I've heard, this whole thing has been a clusterfuck from the start. Everyone's been so goddamn paranoid.

"People fear that which they don't understand. And fear leads to lousy decisions. The Russians and Chinese were convinced the US was behind the floaters, that the floaters represented some kind of alien-human alliance led by the West. No one could believe that NASA wasn't on top of communication with the alien fleet moving through our atmosphere. Truth's a bitch. The reality was, we were as surprised as everyone else.

"The Russians brought down any floater that crossed into their air space, while the Chinese used tactical nukes against a bunch of floaters that entered the atmosphere over Mongolia. There was no way they were going to allow a bunch of aliens to drift over Beijing or Shanghai.

"The US was more tolerant. At least it wasn't our official position to bring down the atmospheric craft, but there were plenty of red-necks willing to try. And once the floaters were down, the hunting began. There's been newsreel showing US civilians parading the carcasses of dead aliens through the streets of Dallas-Fort Worth, Des Moines Iowa, Oklahoma City, you name it.

"A couple of trigger happy pilots in the National Guard brought down another floater outside of DC. That the alien craft was passing almost fifty miles inland from the capital didn't matter. They complained about lost comms and said they had to take the initiative. The Media treated them like fucking heroes. As far as the Press was concerned, they were repelling the invasion. NASA pleaded for reason, but no one listened. They were too busy celebrating our independence

from an alien war that never happened."

Bower was speechless.

"Apparently, your buddy with the red, wavy fronds can be pretty darn vicious when cornered, but these aliens were still no match for a gang of armed men motivated by sixty years of Hollywood hyperbole. It didn't take too long for word to get out that the alien's core is vulnerable. No armor. Can you imagine that, going into battle without any armor."

"They didn't think they were going into battle," Bower said, feeling indignant.

"Yeah, well, we fucked this up. We were pumped. Too many movies or ghost stories, I guess, but we were ready for them. Problem is, they weren't ready for us."

"So what's going to happen to Stella?" Elvis asked.

"Shit, I don't know," Jameson replied.

Bower didn't believe him. There was a slight hesitation in his reply, just enough to cause her to doubt his sincerity.

Jameson must have caught the look on her face, as he continued explaining. "As soon as I confirmed we had a live alien in custody, control got passed from CentCom to NASA. There are a whole bunch of guys stateside dying to talk to you two… well, to you three."

"I won't let anything happen to her, Sarge."

Elvis gritted his teeth. He looked as though he could have taken on the entire US army singlehanded.

"Easy, big guy. No one's going to hurt her. In fact, that's what all this is about. The South Africans have orders not to let anyone within a mile of the embassy. They're going house to house, driving everyone out, pushing them back beyond the cordon. And that fly-by, that was purely for show. Those birds don't need to come in that low. They're flexing muscle, sending a clear signal to the rebels that the gloves are off. There's two AC-130U Spooky gunships en-route with orders to flatten anyone that so much as sticks their head out of a window with a weapon. Malawi's center stage. Lilongwe is going into lockdown."

"And your orders?" Bower asked.

"To keep you safe, all of you."

"Next steps?" Elvis asked.

Jameson smiled. He had been hiding something, that much Bower knew. Elvis called his bluff. Jameson must have been lousy at Poker.

"Look, don't be alarmed. There's no conspiracy here. The UN is going into overdrive to protect your friend. No one's going to let anything happen to her."

"Where are they taking her?" Elvis asked coldly, and Bower got the distinct impression Elvis knew what was happening, perhaps not the specifics, but he understood the military mindset. NASA might

have executive control, but operational control had to lie with some general somewhere, and Bower didn't even want to think about the political machinations of the United Nations complicating things further.

"There's no secret base at Area-51 or anything like that. The powers that be simply want to get the alien into a secure environment."

"Where?" Elvis demanded.

"The William Lawrence is steaming down from Dar El Salam into the straits between Mozambique and Madagascar, while the Ronald Reagan has turned back from Diego Garcia and is en-route toward Dar El Salam to provide air support."

Bower cried out, saying. "You're going to put her on a warship? Are you mad?" She couldn't help herself. She got to her feet, as though standing would somehow make her objections more resonant.

"Think about it," Jameson replied. "She's in the middle of a war zone. It's the safest option."

Bower shook her head.

"They're sending in a Osprey to take you to the USS William Lawrence."

"And what if we don't want to go?" Bower demanded, her hands resting on her hips. She could see the lieutenant standing behind Jameson. He was quiet, letting Jameson do the talking.

"No one's going to force you to do anything," Jameson replied, his hands out in a gesture of friendship. "Look, Liz. It's me. You know me. Remember back in the village? There's nothing I wouldn't do to keep you out of harm's way. I'm not going to do anything that would hurt you or Elvis or this creature. Sure, I've got orders but, honestly, if I thought they were in anyway belligerent I'd have no hesitation in defying them."

He breathed deeply.

"This is bigger than any of us," he continued. "Look, they're flying in a NASA specialist from India. He should get to the USS William Lawrence around the same time you guys arrive on deck, at least, that's the plan."

"The plan?" Bower asked, an eyebrow raised.

"Liz, we've got to get you out of this country."

Bower didn't like plans being made without her input. Elvis might be used to that kind of authoritarian treatment, but she wasn't.

"So you decided to throw us on a helicopter?"

Jameson opened his hands up in a gesture that suggested he was being honest. "What would you do, Liz? Where could you go from here? Everyone knows you killed Adan. You think the rebels would allow you and your friend safe passage? And what about government

troops? They'll sell you out in a heartbeat with the price that's on your head. And even if you could get out of the city, where would you go? Where would be safe?"

"So what's your plan?" she asked.

"Liz," Jameson continued. "The plan is to get you safely into NASA's hands, the William Lawrence is simply a meeting point. You need to trust me."

"I trust you," Bower replied. "The problem is, I don't trust anyone beyond you."

"And yet you have to. You and Elvis have done something remarkable, something incredible. You've saved the life of one of these things at a time when everyone else was shortsighted and acting out of fear. Now, the world is rallying around you. You've got to trust those that can help."

Bower breathed deeply, looking deep into his eyes.

"Do you trust them?"

Jameson nodded.

That he didn't speak was curious. Bower figured he'd said all there was to say and that he knew both she and Elvis needed to cross this bridge on their own.

Bower wanted to believe him, but she was aware that with each step the situation seemed to slip further out of her control. And yet, what control had she ever really had? None. And what could she and Elvis do with a creature from another world? Where could they go? Where would be safe? Jameson was right, there was nowhere left to run. They'd escaped Adan's men, now they had to trust someone. They couldn't run from everyone.

"Stella ain't going nowhere without me," Elvis growled. It was a double negative, but Bower appreciated the emphasis.

Jameson nodded, providing his consent. He looked at Bower.

"We've got to get her home," she said. "We've got to try to get her back with her folks."

Again, Jameson nodded.

Bower glanced at the creature with its twisting fronds. She suspected Stella knew some of the terms they'd used in their discussion, at least those she and Elvis had taught her, but Bower doubted whether the alien understood all that had been said. If the creature understood, it never let on as it continued to examine the plants with absorbed interest.

Elvis walked over toward the alien, saying, "Home, Stella. We're going to take you home."

"Home," the creature said, still using Bower's voice. It was only then Bower noticed the soldier holding a handy-cam as he stood in the doorway, capturing their conversation and the creature's reactions on

video. This would make for some interesting viewing at some point, she figured.

"Yes. Home," replied Elvis, reaching out and gently touching the alien's blood-red, glassy fronds. The creature towered above him, reaching up to within a foot of the ceiling. The edge of its tentacles looked sharp, like the blade of a knife. If Bower didn't know better she would have expected to see Elvis withdraw a bleeding hand, but he didn't. Stella was equally gentle with him.

Someone was talking to Jameson, whispering in his ear.

Jameson turned to them and said, "One of the Spooks is on station, the Osprey is on approach. We need to get to the helipad on the roof. I don't want to linger. Even with all this firepower bearing down on the city, I don't want to tempt a fool with an RPG."

"Green light, Stella. It's time to take you home," Elvis said as he grabbed his starched shirt from the table, carrying it like a jacket over his shoulder. He followed Jameson through the doorway and out into the hallway. The alien didn't hesitate. Bower followed behind the broad creature. The cameraman beside her was fascinated by the alien's motion, leaning down to get a good long shot.

As they crossed the reception area, Bower was aware of eyes watching from all sides. No one on Earth had seen anything like this before, well, very few had, she figured. There was an understandable level of curiosity.

Jameson led them up a broad staircase, along a first floor corridor and then waited behind a metal fire-door overlooking a rooftop helipad.

"How do you think she's going to take the noise of a helicopter?" Bower asked. "And what about the disorienting motion associated with flight?"

"How did she take the truck ride?" Jameson asked in reply.

Bower shrugged, to her there was a world of difference, but he didn't seem to think so.

Looking through the small glass panel in the door, Bower saw the Osprey come in hard. The pilot wasted no time putting the craft down. The rear ramp lowered and a single soldier jogged out, the loadmaster.

Jameson opened the door and the noise within the corridor jumped from roughly seventy decibels to well over a hundred and ten. Unlike the pilot of the Osprey that had touched down in the village of Abatta, this pilot wasn't powering down his engines. They sounded like a freight-train roaring past.

The alien bristled and began moving back toward Bower, moving away from the door.

"You're scaring her," Bower yelled above the commotion.

“We have to go,” Jameson yelled.

“Green light, Stella. Green light,” Elvis cried, but the creature ignored even him.

Bower knew she had to do something, and yet the prospect of being skewered by the glistening, sharp blades of the creature terrified her. She dropped to one knee, making herself small. Fronds lashed out before her, and she had visions of being shredded like Bosco, and yet something similar had transpired when the factory door had been opened. Stella had responded to her back then, not more than twelve hours ago.

Bower closed her eyes.

“I know,” she said softly, barely able to hear her own voice over the rush of noise around her, and yet she was confident Stella could hear her. Bower had long suspected Stella understood more than she let on. “I know you’re afraid. I am afraid too.”

In the factory, using the same terms in different ways had helped Bower communicate basic concepts with the alien. She hoped that would work now.

“We’re all afraid, but we need to get you home. We need to get you away from here.”

She opened her eyes. Several of the insects that normally clung to the creature’s core sat on the end of the fronds closest to her face, swaying gently before her, examining her, trying to arrive at a course of action.

“I know you’ve been hurt. We all have, but don’t be afraid. You need to trust us, we’re taking you home. Green light, Stella. Green light.”

Again, Bower’s suspicions about the tiny creatures on the fronds seemed to be confirmed. Rather than one alien, it appeared she was dealing with hundreds, perhaps thousands of them, all riding a behemoth that responded to their deft touch like a chariot. There was intelligence there. Although she knew better, she couldn’t help but read intelligence into the tiny creatures staring back at her. They were sentient, she was sure of it.

“Stella,” Elvis called out over the howling wind. “Green light, Baby. We’re taking you home.”

“Home,” the creature replied, and Bower finally understood why the alien retained her voice. The extraterrestrial creature might have had its closest affinity with Elvis, but it had always been Bower who spoke with clarity. Stella trusted Elvis to act, Bower to speak.

Slowly, the alien moved back toward Elvis.

Bower watched as the tiny creatures nearest to her remained on the trailing fronds. They leaped from one swaying, spindly appendage to another as the spiky alien apparatus rolled away from her, keeping

their focus on her, ensuring she continued to follow.

Elvis stood on the tailgate of the Osprey, calling out over the noise of the engines. Stella followed him. Bower stayed close behind them, despite her misgivings about these hybrid aircraft. The loadmaster closed the ramp as the craft lifted off the ground in a hurry, before Bower was seated. The last thing she saw beyond the imposing steel ramp was Jameson and Smithy waving goodbye.

Elvis moved up through the empty belly of the craft and took a seat near one of the few windows in the fuselage. Stella stayed by his side.

Bower staggered through the craft as it rose rapidly in the sky, holding on to webbing on the sidewalls to keep her balance. These were clearly combat pilots. Comfort wasn't a concern. Bower understood there was a need to be safe, but it wasn't like anyone on the ground actually knew they were carrying an alien, or even cared. Her stomach was queasy. She wondered whether she should ask the loadmaster for a barf bag now or later. Moving hand over hand up through the cargo hold, she eventually dropped herself down opposite Elvis and the alien.

The loadmaster stayed down by the ramp, and Bower could understand why. The alien creature half-enveloped Elvis. Stella anchored herself, wrapping her scarlet-red fronds around one of the seats and some webbing reaching up high on the side of the craft, but she was so close to Elvis she covered part of him. Elvis didn't seem bothered in the slightest by the swirl of red blades drifting past his face and body. Beetles and bugs swarmed over his chest, around his neck and down his anemic left arm. Bower was fascinated. She wanted to get up close, to watch what they were doing, but their magic, for lack of a better word, probably wasn't visible until you got down to a microscopic level, perhaps even a subatomic level.

Elvis pointed at his head. He had put on a pair of headphones with a small microphone attached. Bower looked around and grabbed a pair from the wall. There was a knob on the side. She twisted it and the whine of the engines vanished.

"They're noise canceling," Elvis said. Although she saw his lips move, the sound of his voice came through the headphones as though he were standing behind her. "You've got three channels. Cargo-hold, cockpit and air traffic control, although we can only talk on the cargo loop."

"Ah," Bower replied, getting used to the tinny sound of her own voice echoing back to her. "OK, this is pretty cool. I could get used to this." Normally, all she got was a set of plastic earplugs to block out the noise.

"How does it feel?" she asked, gesturing toward his arm, which

was now a seething mass of tiny creatures.

"Like a massage, a really good, deep massage."

"Huh."

"Flight time is three hours twenty minutes," the loadmaster said, and Bower got the impression he was being polite, speaking to let them know he was active on the cargo loop more than anything else. Privacy was a rarity in the military.

The door to the cockpit opened slightly. Bower expected someone to walk through, but they must have got a good look at the huge alien apparently devouring a soldier in the cargo hold and thought better of walking in. The door slammed shut. A few seconds later, another voice spoke over the cargo loop.

"Just wanted to check that you're all OK."

"We're good," replied Elvis, winking at Bower.

"Roger that, will relay to Command."

There was a pause for a moment before either the pilot or copilot added, "We'll monitor the cargo channel. If any emergency arises and you need us to put down, let me know."

"We'll be fine," said Elvis.

Bower was doing her best not to laugh. What for them had become commonplace must have seemed like something out of a horror movie. The poor bloody pilots, she thought, they're probably half-expecting the alien to come tearing through the steel cockpit door and smear their brains all over the inside of the windshield.

Elvis could see her trying to suppress her laughter. He held his finger up to his lips, signaling for her to be quiet. She mouthed the words, "I'm sorry."

Bower had to say something, not just to keep from laughing but to help the pilots understand. To have remained quiet would have been cruel. She tried not to laugh as she spoke, but it was difficult to convey a sense of seriousness.

"Ah, please don't worry about us. I know it must look awfully disconcerting seeing our interstellar guest for the first time, but please be assured, she's as gentle as a lamb."

It was a lie, but what did another lie hurt? And hearing it from a woman probably helped soothe their nerves a little.

"Roger that," came the reply.

Bower was curious.

"So," she said. "Did you guys draw the short straw for this mission?"

"No ma'am. This was voluntary."

"Well, that was rather brave of you."

"Or stupid," the unseen officer replied over the headset. Bower liked him already, and laughed somewhat politely in reply, just

enough so that her laughter sounded civil.

The flight leveled out so she stood and looked out the small port on the side of the craft. She had to pull on the curled audio cord leading to her headset to get a good look.

"How high are we?"

"Just on twelve thousand feet."

Although the window was small, if Bower moved around she could see a wider field of view. Above them, several fighter jets sat off in the distance, heading in the same direction. There was another helicopter to one side, slightly ahead of them. She got the impression there were several more airplanes or choppers accompanying them, catching a faint glimpse of another craft from the edge of the window.

"They're not taking any chances, are they?"

"No, ma'am."

Below them, the jungle canopy rolled over the hills, smothering the land in a sea of green leaves. A large lake passed beneath the Osprey, its blue waters looked serene. In the distance, the ocean loomed large, an abrupt end to Africa. Bower stood there for a while, watching as the shoreline slowly approached. She wanted to talk, but she felt like no one wanted to talk with her. For the pilots and the loadmaster any conversation was limited, and she didn't get the feeling Elvis wanted to talk openly while there were prying ears, regardless of their intentions. Elvis seemed happy to freak them out.

She sat down again and slouched in the seat. Before long the rhythmic pulse through the fuselage caused her to drift off to sleep.

It seemed as though no sooner had she closed her eyes than someone was saying, "We're five minutes out," waking her from her slumber.

Three hours had passed in the blink of an eye.

The headphones hurt her head. Like everything military, they were designed to be functional, not comfortable. She lifted them away from her ears for a moment, wanting to free her head from their vice-like grip, but the deafening sound of the engines overruled her discomfort and she put them back on. Five minutes couldn't come soon enough.

Bower was tempted to get up and watch the landing out of the window, but that probably wasn't the smartest move, and besides, what would she see? Probably just the ocean. Looking sideways, she wouldn't see the ship until they touched down.

A couple of minutes later, the pilot said, "Fifty meters."

Bower could feel the Osprey slowing its descent, hovering as it picked its spot for landing. The wheels touched down gently and she breathed a sigh of relief as the engines powered down.

Stella had been quiet throughout the trip, but during the descent

the alien must have realized they'd arrived. The tiny insects swarming over Elvis returned to the bulbous heart of the spindly creature. Elvis looked at his arm. It looked entirely normal, as though nothing had ever happened. Bower shook her head in admiration. There was a lot she could learn from Stella in regards to medical science.

The engines dropped to a whine and Bower removed her headphones. The rear ramp lowered and Bower could already feel the gentle sway of the ship beneath them as it rolled through the swell of the open ocean. The smell of sea spray filled the air.

Several officers stood on the deck well beyond the Osprey's open tailgate, but Bower's eyes were drawn to the film crew. There were three cameramen, at least Bower assumed they were men, she couldn't tell at first.

"Green light," said Elvis, getting up and putting his shirt on.

Bower and Elvis walked side by side down the ramp. In some unspoken agreement they were shielding Stella. It was a token gesture, but Stella seemed to appreciate their slow walk. Out of the corner of her eye, Bower could see Stella edging forward behind them, wary of a new environment. Could Stella swim? This could be terrifying for the alien.

For the most part, the flight deck was empty, but Bower could see sailors further up the craft working with a crane. The welcoming committee gave them plenty of room to step down onto the deck.

"I'm Captain Helen Lovell," one of the officers said, introducing herself. "This is my XO, James Davidson."

Bower was pleasantly surprised to meet a female captain of a warship. Both she and Elvis introduced themselves. Bower shook hands with Captain Lovell, while Elvis saluted.

Stella kept her distance, but she was on the deck of the ship with its rough, painted grit surface designed to keep sailors from slipping in the wet. Stella looked magnificent against the drab, battleship grays surrounding her. Her red fronds glistened in the sunlight.

Bower was sure Stella was aware of this amiable exchange and hoped the pleasantries would put the alien at ease. In shaking Davidson's hand, she could feel his fingers trembling slightly. It had to be nerve-wracking to put on a pretense of civility with a massive alien creature looming blood-red behind them.

The film crew were wearing NASA polo shirts.

"Dr. Anish Ambar," said an older man, speaking with a distinct Indian accent. His face was kind, his skin a soft shade of brown. He was impeccably groomed, with a neatly trimmed mustache and short black hair. Soft grey highlights peppered his mustache but his hair still retained its youthful vigor. "Director of Astrobiology with SETI, based out of Mumbai."

“It’s a pleasure,” Bower replied. She went to introduce herself, but Dr. Anish continued speaking.

“Dr. Bower, we are deeply indebted to you and your colleague for preserving the life of this remarkable creature.”

Bower turned to one side, “Dr. Ambar, this is Stella. Stella, Dr. Ambar.” There was a nice introversion in a formal introduction. Bower hoped Stella picked up on that, with the repetition of both names making it clear these were proper nouns.

Over the past day, Bower had observed how the alien could alter its apparent height by flexing or softening the blades that carried it onward. Here, on the deck of a US warship, the creature raised up on the tip of its blades, giving it an impressive height of almost ten feet. Its medusa-like head of scarlet fronds swayed like a snake sampling the air with its tongue.

The cameras were rolling, catching footage of the majestic red blades and the swarm of creatures at Stella’s heart.

One of the cameramen stepped out to get a clear shot of the alien and Stella reacted, bristling with her fronds stiffening like sword blades.

“You’re going to have to put those away,” Elvis said. “She may think they’re weapons.”

“Of course, of course,” Dr. Ambar replied. The cameramen didn’t have to be told, they took the cameras off their shoulders and held them next to their thighs, still recording but without appearing threatening. Lovell and Davidson looked uncomfortably nervous.

Stella ambled closer to Elvis and Bower.

“Easy girl,” Elvis said, his hands reaching out and touching her sharp spear tips. Stella responded, her fronds wrapping gently around his hand like leather straps. She relaxed her legs as well, allowing the fronds that held her up to flex and settle on the deck. The NASA film crew caught the interaction on video, and Bower could see Dr. Ambar was fascinated.

“If you’ll excuse us,” Captain Lovell said. “We need to get this deck cleared and report in to the task force. The alien craft is no more than seventy nautical miles out and I want to make sure we’re not in breach of our obligations.”

Both Bower and Elvis went to speak at the same time, stunned by what they were hearing. Elvis let Bower continue.

“I’m sorry, could you explain?”

Lovell and Davidson had already turned. They climbed a set of stairs leading from the flight deck to the com-tower. From there, they wasted no time in disappearing inside the bowels of the ship.

“It’s OK,” Dr. Ambar replied, seeing the concern on Bower’s face. “We should be fine here, they just want to dump the Osprey.”

“Dump the Osprey?” Bower said, confused.

She looked back. Several sailors dressed in chemical warfare suits were working with a low-profile, heavy-duty tractor to push the Osprey toward the edge of the ship. The flight crew from the Osprey were standing to one side, watching as the squat looking vehicle with beefy tires pushed on the wheels of their aircraft. One wheel on the Osprey slipped, crashing with a thud on the edge of the landing deck and Stella flexed.

“Green light,” Elvis said, remaining in physical contact with the creature to provide some reassurance.

The tractor repositioned itself, pushing on the front wheel of the aircraft and the Osprey plunged overboard, disappearing over the side of the ship and splashing into the water.

The NASA film crew discretely recorded Stella’s reactions from several angles, watching as she again bristled defensively at the sharp crack of noise and the motion of the tractor.

Bower walked to one side and looked down the length of the ship as crewmen and women dumped various pieces of military hardware over the edge of the USS William Lawrence. Although she didn’t recognize most of the equipment being dumped, she did catch sight of a platform-mounted Gatling gun. The gun was easily the size of a compact car, with a large steel plate at its base and some kind of radar dome near the multiple gun barrels. The crane released the Gatling gun and it plunged into the sea, disappearing beneath the waves in a burst of spray.

“What’s going on?” Elvis asked.

“We’ve been in contact with the mothership,” Dr. Ambar said. “They’re coming to get her.”

Bower heard that. She jogged back over. She didn’t know whether to be excited for Stella or wary.

“You’re using her as bait?” Elvis asked, clearly defensive.

“Not as bait,” Ambar replied in his distinct, Bombay accent. “She is a peace offering. We are trying to show this interstellar alien species that all this was a mistake. Returning Stella is a goodwill offering, something to let them know we are sorry for what has transpired, we’re making amends. This is a repatriation.”

“You’ve been in contact with them?” Bower asked, seeking clarification. “So you can talk to them?”

“Not so much talk as make declarations. They understand far more than they let on when they speak back.”

“But they talk back?”

“Yes. But their replies are often just a bunch of nouns thrown together. There’s no grammar or syntax, just blunt nouns and the odd verb. After we made it clear one of their kind had survived they sent a

floater. We observed the craft enter our atmosphere about two hours ago, over water rather than land."

Dr. Ambar pointed behind the ship. "We should get our first glimpse of the rescue craft from somewhere over there. In the meantime, the USS William Lawrence is under orders to demilitarize. They're throwing all their weaponry overboard along with anything that could be mistaken as a weapon."

He paused for a moment. His voice sounded introspective, sad.

"But they're leaving. They're abandoning the petulant children of Earth."

"I don't understand? Why would they leave?" Elvis asked.

"They said they have what they came for."

"What did they come for?" Bower asked.

"We don't know. We were hoping you might be able to help us figure that out. I have my own ideas but nothing concrete. If they came to examine our intelligence they've surely concluded we're barbarians. We have overreacted, we've ruined our first contact with life from beyond this small orb."

"What were the pods?" Bower asked. "Did you get to examine any of them?"

"Yes," Dr. Ambar replied. "But they broke down rapidly in our highly oxygenated atmosphere.

"We were able to examine some of the organic residue. In nature, there are roughly twenty or so amino acids that make up the bulk of the proteins we observe in the animal kingdom, but we know of over five hundred amino acids in all. These alien creatures and their pods incorporate roughly three hundred of these acids in their biology, making them distinctly unique from any form of life on Earth."

He adjusted his glasses as he spoke.

"It's no surprise, of course, after all, they are aliens, but it was important to observe as it rules out any kind of panspermia relationship between us and them."

Bower nodded, struggling to keep up with the concepts he was posing.

Dr. Ambar gestured with his hands as he spoke.

"We think the pods were probes. A team of researchers out of MIT detected a faint electromagnetic signal from one of the pods, and they were able to observe the signal change as the pod was exposed to different kinds of organic substances. Just someone entering the room was enough to elicit a unique transmission. These probes appear to have been sampling Earth."

"So they were dropping probes like sonar buoys?" Elvis asked.

"Yes. They weren't seeding Earth, they were surveying our biology, gathering information on our ecosystem in much the same

way we would conduct a survey of life in a rainforest. Well, it's only a theory, my theory, but I think that's why they left. The survey was complete."

"But that makes no sense," Elvis said. "They've come all this way, why leave so soon?"

"Look at us," Dr. Ambar said. "We've been acting like spoiled brats. We've been throwing tantrums, carrying on like they owe us something. They owe us nothing. Our focus has been so insular, so egotistical. Earth is about us, humans, homo sapiens. Maybe, just maybe, they disagree.

"We can rage all we want, but they don't owe us anything. As hard as it is to accept, there's a lesson here for humanity: the universe does not revolve around our every whim."

Dr. Ambar stepped slowly past Elvis, reaching out toward the alien creature.

"We killed hundreds of them, but we're not even sure how in most cases. Once the decay process starts their bodies are gone within days, leaving nothing but trace elements. Most of them died in the crashes. Those that survived were hunted down and killed by fearful soldiers from all countries, and yet our bullets never so much as scratched their magnificent frame. So curious."

Stella allowed Dr. Ambar to touch her stiff legs as they spread wide across the deck to keep her stable.

"This specimen is the first one I've heard of that's docile."

"Oh," Elvis replied. "Docile isn't a word I'd use to describe Stella. You don't want to see her when she gets angry."

"And yet it wasn't anger," Bower added. "It was fear. She was afraid of us."

"Fear?" Dr. Ambar said, somewhat lost in thought at the concept.

Hundreds of tiny creatures streamed down the alien's fronds, touching briefly against Dr. Ambar's fingers before retreating again.

"Magnificent," he said without any hint of fear in his voice.

One of the cameramen standing with Ambar said, "I'm picking up oscillating shades in both infrared and ultraviolet."

Dr. Ambar and Bower looked down at the cameraman's screen as he held his camera low. The screen was divided in two, with false color representing the various spectra. The patterns differed from each other and from those they were seeing in the visible spectrum.

"Multitasking?" Ambar suggested.

Bower shrugged, she went to say something but Elvis cut her off, pointing at the horizon as he said, "They're here."

# Chapter 16: Contact

A floater was visible on the horizon, moving parallel to the USS William Lawrence. Even at a distance of roughly twenty miles, the bulbous head was apparent as were the trailing tentacles.

"I want footage from multiple angles," Ambar said as Captain Lovell stepped back out onto the flight deck. "James, get up to the bridge. Stay on the wide-angle as long as you can. Stevens, head to the stern. Campelli, you stay with me."

The cameramen split up.

Lovell walked over, saying, "We're currently steaming due north at 18 knots with a slight headwind. We'll hold this course until after the rendezvous is complete. The alien vessel is gaining at a steady rate so I don't see any problem with this heading. Do we have any idea how the craft will land?"

Ambar and Bower looked at each other; neither had an answer.

"We're 509 feet in length, displacing 6,800 tons light, with a total displacement of just over 9,000 tons, with our current loading we have roughly 1200 tons leeway. Do you have any idea how heavy that floater is or if it will touch down in its entirety?"

Bower bit her lip. The prospect of being accidentally sunk by the weight of the alien craft hadn't crossed her mind. She just assumed everything would be OK.

"I'm sure we'll be fine, captain," Dr. Ambar replied. Bower knew that tone of voice, that was the 'I have no bloody idea, but I'm in charge so it will be fine' pseudo-authoritative tone she'd used so many times before as a doctor. It was a bluff, the bravado of a mind confident of tackling whatever may come, only in this circumstance it was sorely misplaced, and she knew it.

Captain Lovell didn't seem to question Dr. Ambar's rather vague judgment. In a bland, matter-of-fact tone, she said, "We have two other destroyers, the USS Dewey and the USS Sampson, roughly fifty nautical miles to our north-east, ready to render assistance if needed. My crew is on standby for evacuation. If the order to evacuate is given, you will be issued with a life-vest and life-rafts will be deployed."

Ambar nodded, saying, "Understood. Thank you, captain."

Lovell excused herself.

Stella had spotted the floater. Her core lit up with rolling patterns, glistening in the setting sun.

"Green light," the creature said, and Dr. Ambar had a double-take, looking at both the alien and Bower, recognizing Bower's voice. Bower smiled. Dr. Ambar seemed to want some kind of explanation

but that was beyond her. Bower simply shrugged her shoulders.

"Yes," Elvis replied. "Green light. You're going home, Stella, home."

"Home."

The alien's fronds no longer waved with the breeze, they stiffened momentarily, but not in a manner that seemed hostile. It was as though the creature was stretching and then relaxing. The core of the alien continued to display an astonishing variety of patterns, moving in a pattern reminiscent of a kaleidoscope.

Bower, Elvis and Dr. Ambar stood alone with the cameraman, watching Stella as she scurried around the deck of the warship in excitement.

Stella couldn't sit still, Bower noted, smiling at the realization of just how human that seemed. Perhaps they were more alike than she thought. Could it be that intelligent life everywhere felt at least the same base emotions? Fear, excitement, joy, sorrow and satisfaction; these were primal parts of human intelligence. As much as she liked to think of herself as coldly logical, she knew that was a myth of her own choosing. There was no Mr. Spock. For the most part, those that considered themselves logical were blind to the emotions that drove them on. And here, she could see the same effervescence she knew she'd feel setting foot in England again, or on seeing her Mom and Dad again. It was the excitement of life.

Stella's fronds slapped at the deck. She raced from one side to another, back and forth, zigging and zagging. For the first time, her fronds changed color, pulsing from red to blue, passing through every hue in the rainbow.

"She's as excited as a puppy dog," Elvis said.

"We have so much to learn," Dr. Ambar added.

The cameraman moved to one side, getting a shot of them with Stella racing around and the floater in the background. Bower found herself wondering who was watching. She'd already seen dozens of faces at the various portholes and windows behind them, each vying for a clear view, with camera phones held up to capture this extraordinary moment.

Was this encounter being broadcast live? Bower felt like she should be doing something other than just standing there.

"Isn't she beautiful?" Dr. Ambar asked.

"Yes, she is," Bower replied, not having thought of the alien in such terms before. Dr. Ambar awakened the sense of awe she felt when she first saw the alien spacecraft in orbit so high above the atmosphere.

They stood there watching Stella as the floater drifted to within a mile or so, slowly moving closer to the Lawrence. Bower marveled at

the brilliant plumage displayed by the alien vessel. The extended bladder kept the floater buoyant within Earth's atmosphere. The rich purples, yellows and reds stretching across the bladder were accentuated by the last rays of the sun slipping below the horizon.

The alien craft paced itself so it would reach the warship without overshooting them. By the time the floater was overhead, the alien craft matched both their speed and direction. As the floater reached the Lawrence, it descended, coming down from several hundred feet. This was a larger craft than those Bower had seen in Africa, easily dwarfing the warship. Her heart pounded within her chest.

The wind howled across the deck. Sea-spray hung in the air. The warship rolled slightly with the swell of the ocean. But all eyes were on the tubular proboscis descending from beneath the floater.

To Bower, the proboscis looked distinctly like the trachea of a human. There were dozens of seemingly cartilage rings evenly spaced, providing the proboscis with structure, allowing it to form a tunnel large enough to drive a car within. There was no differentiation between the base, sides or roof of this windpipe-like structure. It would have looked the same from any orientation and Bower wondered about its function when it wasn't rescuing stranded aliens.

"Here we go," Dr. Ambar said.

The underside of the floater rested on the mast extending above the bridge of the USS William Lawrence. If the captain wasn't already freaked out, she would be now. Bower watched as the radar domes on either side of the mast disappeared into a thick mat of blood red organic matter. As the proboscis extended down to the lower flight deck, the sound of metal groaning under the weight of the alien craft filled the air. Bower felt the warship shift beneath her feet, skewing slightly to one side beneath the imposing alien craft.

As the proboscis reached to within a few feet of the deck, Stella raced up to it, clambering onboard with astonishing agility. Within a fraction of a second, she was gone. The proboscis rested on the deck, oozing a sticky, transparent saliva, for lack of a better word.

There was no goodbye, no acknowledgment of all they'd been through, no emotional parting. Stella was gone.

Dr. Ambar stepped back while Elvis and Bower remained where they were, barely ten feet from the fleshy alien appendage. Bower wasn't sure what the alien craft was waiting for, but the seconds passed, turning to minutes. Elvis looked at her but he didn't speak. Words failed them. Looking down the empty alien trachea, Bower could see what seemed to be mucus lining the inside of the fleshy tube.

Over the howl of the whirling wind, she heard two words, "Green light."

There, rolling down the inside of the proboscis, was Stella. She was moving around the tunnel, racing down through the trachea in a corkscrew motion that took her over the ceiling several times.

"Green light. Understand? Green light."

"What do you…" Elvis never finished his sentence. Like Bower, he had to have known what she meant. The alien creature wheeled before the two of them, its gooey fronds gently slapping at her arms and raking across his chest. Again, Stella cried, "Understand. Green light. Understand."

Bower hesitated. Stella rocked around behind her, gently urging her on with her fronds softly tapping her back and shoulders.

"Understand," the creature said again.

From behind her, Dr. Ambar said, "Go."

Elvis was already walking forward. He reached out with one hand as he stepped inside the proboscis, saying, "It smells like musty socks." Looking at the slimy substance sticking to his hand, he added, "This is going to get messy."

Bower swallowed.

"Come on," Elvis yelled, already clambering inside the organic alien structure. "What are you afraid of?"

"How about, everything?" Bower cried in reply, to which Elvis laughed.

"What's the worst that could happen?" he asked as she walked forward and stood in front of the proboscis. Mucus oozed around her boots.

"We could die."

"We could," he agreed.

Why did he have to agree? That really didn't help. He was supposed to say something encouraging.

Bower stood there realizing that with one step she would move from her world to another, from the coarse, gritty, battleship-grey flight deck of the USS William Lawrence into a living creature that had traversed the heavens. She took a step, feeling the soft, spongy inside of the trachea beneath her boots, a stark contrast to the firm deck of the warship.

Bower reached out with her hand, leaning to one side so she could use the inside of the proboscis for balance as she stepped into the creature. It didn't feel right to be standing on soft tissue. Everything about what she was doing screamed, No. She wanted to turn and run, but Elvis was right. There was nothing to fear. Her fear was of the unknown, it was irrational. The inquisitive doctor within pushed her onward.

No sooner had Bower's other foot left the deck of the warship than Stella rushed past, twirling across the side and then the roof of

the windpipe as she passed Elvis.

Bower felt the proboscis lift off from the deck of the Lawrence. She couldn't help but look back. She watched as the deck of the warship dropped away rapidly. The proboscis was being withdrawn, its mouth closed like a sphincter, forcing her to move on. The cartilage-like rings were no more than twenty feet apart, but Bower struggled in the soft tissue in between. It was hard to keep her footing and she fell to her knees. Thick mucus covered her trousers.

"Well," she said, accepting a sticky, gooey hand from Elvis to help her stand. "I guess things could be worse."

"That's the spirit," Elvis replied.

Stella returned. Bower assumed it was Stella, but she wasn't sure when another two creatures appeared beside the first alien. It was impossible to tell them apart, although they probably thought about humans the same way. The creature she assumed was Stella picked up Elvis and carried him away, only he was floating on a sea of constantly moving fronds gently slapping against his back. As the creature moved, its arms became legs, wheeling backwards and transforming into arms again as they came around yet again to carry Elvis on.

"Oh," he yelled. "Crowd surfing. I love it."

Bower held out her hand, wanting to say she was fine, that she'd make it on her own, but there was no discussion to be had. Another creature wheeled toward her, engulfing her and raising her up.

She lost sight of Elvis, which worried her.

As she was carried along she called out, "This is like being massaged by a car wash."

"Just go with it," Elvis yelled back, and Bower felt comforted hearing his voice.

To her, being carried by these creatures was the wrong term. Rather than being carried, it felt like the creature never really got her in the right position to hold her properly. She was constantly falling backwards, sliding off as the mass of fronds gently prodded and slapped at her back, keeping her from slipping to the gunky floor. If walking was falling and not hitting the ground, being carried by Stella was akin to being a lumberjack rolling on a log without slipping and getting wet.

And which one was Stella?

Bower noticed the third creature remained between her and Elvis, traveling upside down on the ceiling, and the central core of the creature was larger than either of those that carried them on. That had to be Stella. Rather than committing herself to either of them, Stella was overseeing both of them.

A rhythmic pulse filled the air, deep and resonant. Bower knew

the limits of human hearing extended from a mere twelve cycles per second up to twenty thousand hertz. Whatever this was, it only just reached the lower register. Each pulse was roughly thirty seconds apart, but with each pulse, Bower felt the alien craft push higher into the sky.

"Feels like we're climbing a roller-coaster," Elvis cried from somewhere ahead of her.

"Yeah," she yelled, trying to compose her thoughts. "Did I ever tell you how much I hate roller-coasters?"

Although she couldn't hear Elvis clearly, she was sure he was laughing. And in some ways that was good, that was what they both needed, to distract each other from all that was transpiring around them.

They emerged from the fleshy proboscis into the inside of a large dome towering hundreds of feet above them. It took Bower a few seconds to realize where they were. Whatever this creature was, they were in or on what seemed to equate to the head, but they were still inside the creature, inside the giant bladder providing buoyancy.

Stella's companions let them down gently, rolling them over the top so they descended on their feet. Bower was relieved to find the ground was dry. She wiped the mucus from her trousers and hands, hoping she wasn't breaching some alien protocol by wiping her hands on the warm, leathery ground.

"Home," Stella said, coming before them, confirming for Bower that she had been guiding the others as they carried the two humans up from the warship.

Bower watched in awe as the tiny insects that comprised the heart of the three alien creatures abandoned their spiky red structures, leaving them standing to one side, inert. The insects swarmed across the uneven ground, moving toward the front of the massive floater. As Bower and Elvis walked forward, they saw a cavity before them filled with millions of the tiny creatures, spanning an area easily the size of a basketball court. What had been Stella, to their minds, mingled seamlessly with the sea of tiny creatures below them.

"Look at the turns and folds, the crevasses and channels," Bower said, pointing at the living, pulsating mass before them. "There's structure here, an interconnected network much like a human brain."

Again, a pulse drove the floater higher. The pulses were coming more regularly now, every ten seconds or so. Bower found she had to watch her footing as each pulse drove so hard she had to fight from falling to the ground.

She could see through the semi-transparent membrane out across the indistinct ocean. Clouds dotted the horizon in the distance, but along with the sea they appeared tinted purple through the skin of the

bladder. The muted shades reminded her of the view through a pair of designer sunglasses.

The floater was already well above a cluster of fluffy clouds drifting with the wind. Bower tried to recall the different types of clouds and the various heights at which they drifted, but all she could remember was that cumulus were white and puffy, like a pinch of cotton wool, while cirrus clouds looked like a streak of white paint daubed on the sky.

The craft passed through fine wisps of vapor, cirrus clouds barely visible as smudges against the darkening beyond. They had to be somewhere around twenty thousand feet up. To one side, the coast of Africa appeared as a long, jagged line on the horizon.

Elvis didn't seem too bothered by the pulsing thrust of the alien spacecraft. Bower followed him as he walked around the sloping brain cavity to the front of the alien vessel. There, facing forward, was a set of seats.

"What the hell do you make of these, Doc?"

Bower blinked a couple of times at the sight, trying to process what she was seeing. The seats looked man-made. The sharp lines, repeating square shapes, and straight tubular frame were out of place within the organic structure. Bower wondered if they had been ripped from the fuselage of an aircraft. The dull grey frame supported a row of ten military cargo seats, seemingly identical to those in the Osprey.

Bower was struggling to walk, her knees were on the verge of buckling beneath the pulses. Every five seconds the craft surged higher.

Elvis examined the thin, canvas padding on the seat, the seatbelt and buckle.

"Looks new."

"Looks deliberate," Bower replied, dropping down into one of the seats, relieved to rest her legs as another pulse thrust the craft higher.

Elvis sat down, but he appeared more relaxed, intrigued perhaps.

"You think they got these from the Osprey?"

"The design, maybe," Bower replied. "Stella must have figured we would think this was comfortable."

"Damn," Elvis replied. "We should have demanded an upgrade to First Class."

Bower was struggling for breath now the floater pulsed every two to three seconds. Above them, they could see the massive bladder being drawn back into the body of the craft.

They were seated at the blunt end of the living alien vessel, with just a thin membrane in front of them. Cirrus clouds soared low beneath them. The curvature of Earth was apparent, as was the darkening sky.

“Just like the seats on a roller-coaster,” Elvis said.

“Yeah, just like a roller-coaster,” Bower replied, pulling the seatbelt harness over her shoulders. “Only this roller-coaster is passing through fifty thousand feet.”

Elvis laughed.

The pulsating thrust continued to increase in tempo, driving them on several times a second. Finally, the pulses merged, becoming indistinguishable and the thrust became continuous. Bower felt like an elephant was sitting on her chest. She took short breaths, trying not to hyperventilate. Her arms felt like lead weights beside her, while her neck and head were pushed back into the headrest.

Bower felt light-headed. She focused on clenching her arms and legs, trying to use her muscles to keep the blood from rushing away from her head.

She could feel her body being propelled onward, accelerating upward. Her face felt stretched, her cheeks pinned back, and still the alien vessel thrust them on.

Suddenly, the pulsating engines eased and Bower felt like she was going over the top of a roller-coaster and plunging down the far side. Her eyes were shut. She didn’t want to look. She had to look. She opened her eyes and saw Earth curving beneath her, stretching out as smooth as a bowling ball.

“Oh, dear God,” Elvis mumbled.

At first, Bower didn’t notice the physical change around her, but she was no longer anchored to the seat. She was so distracted by the sensation of falling that all other considerations faded. This was worse than jumping out of a plane with a parachute. She couldn’t even begin to tell herself everything was going to be all right. Bower felt as though she was plunging down an elevator shaft or falling from a skyscraper, falling in a dream, a nightmare from which she desperately wanted to wake. In the darkness of night, she kept waiting to hit the ground, but the ground never came.

Even in retrospect, Bower couldn’t identify whether the view around them changed smoothly or abruptly, all she knew was once there had been an alien spacecraft, now there was nothing, nothing between her and the dark void of space.

Elvis had his eyes shut, she remembered that, but the alien spacecraft had disappeared. Whereas before the alien membrane in front of their seats had given her a tinted view of reality, now she could see clearly.

The horizon ran in an arc before her, cutting through the darkness, separating the night below from the pitch black of space. It would take her some time to get used to having no fixed point of orientation, but initially she thought the planet was on an angle,

sloping away steeply to her right. That she was slowly turning wasn't apparent at first.

A hazy blue line traced the horizon, revealing how perilously thin Earth's atmosphere was as seen from orbit. The gently curving planet looked serene. What little she could see in the darkness looked flattened, as though there were no elevation, no mountains or valleys.

Clouds and coastlines curved with the planet, catching her eye not because they were familiar, but because they looked stretched and elongated. A mesh of lights lit up a city off to one side and Bower wondered where they were relative to the various major cities on Earth.

She felt small.

The pitch black of space was ominous, foreboding. Even the stars seemed further away, which didn't make sense to her, and yet there they were, static pin-pricks of light fighting off the eternal darkness.

Bower clenched at the straps running over her shoulders. Her knuckles were white with terror. She looked at Elvis. He'd opened his eyes and was staring straight ahead, trying not to look at anything in particular.

"Oh, fuck. Oh, fuck," he repeated silently to himself.

It was only as she was looking at him she realized there was no seat beneath either of them. The straps she thought she was holding onto were the bunched folds of her own clothes. Bower put her hand down, wanting to touch the stiff, hard cushion beneath her, but her fingers grasped at nothing.

She was floating freely in space.

In her initial panic, she turned only to find she kept turning. Bower twisted the other way, trying to stabilize herself.

She watched as her hands floated up before her, drifting as though they had a mind of their own. Bower felt as though she were swimming, floating in deep water. Her body naturally moved into a neutral, fetus position, with her thighs out in front of her.

She breathed deeply, calming herself. She had drifted to one side and couldn't see Elvis, but she could hear him still cursing under his breath.

"Hey," she said.

Bower wanted to add something else but she was at a loss as to what. She was disoriented physically, mentally and emotionally, unsure quite what to think as the stars rolled past her blurred vision.

With each motion, the horizon shifted. Any notion of up and down dissolved. She reached out with her hands, stretching out her legs, trying to steady herself. If a skater could spin faster by drawing in their limbs, she sought to slow her motion by extending hers. Her heart was racing. She needed to calm down.

A hand rested on her shoulder, turning her gently to one side.

"I think I'm going to be sick," Elvis said, and she could hear him trying to suppress a gag reflex.

"Try to look at something in the distance," she said. "Just like at sea. Try not to move."

Elvis didn't answer. He looked pale.

"Breathe slowly, and keep your eyes on some fixed point."

Typical bloody doctor, she thought, great advice for someone else, but never advice you'll take yourself. Bower turned slowly, trying not to subject herself to any quick motion. She tried to pick a point in the distance, but everything was in motion. She too was struggling with the urge to vomit. A sickening feeling welled up within her stomach. It felt as though her insides had become unhinged. Not only did her hands and legs float freely but so did her innards.

Elvis couldn't help himself. He vomited. The contents of his stomach sprayed outward in a thick stream. Bower expected his spew to arc, but it projected in a straight line.

His stomach muscles contracted and he spewed again. Bower noticed he was drifting away from her. She reached out, grabbing at his loose shirt.

The sick continued to drift away. Bower watched, wanting to see what it would hit, but it simply kept going as though there were no boundary, no wall enclosing them, and yet that wasn't possible.

Elvis wiped his mouth on his sleeve. Small drops of spew floated before him. The smell got to her, making her feel green. She couldn't appreciate how remarkable it was to see fluids floating there undulating in globules of various sizes.

"I don't understand," Elvis said. "What's happening?"

"Ah," Bower began. "It appears we're in orbit."

"Where are they? Where's Stella?"

"I don't know," she replied.

As she gazed into the distance, the spew faded from sight, drifting out into space. Distances were impossible to judge, but she figured she lost sight of it somewhere around a fifty yards.

"Are we still in the floater?" Elvis asked.

"I don't know," Bower replied.

"How can this be?" Elvis asked. "If we were in space, we'd die. There's no air."

"At a guess," she said, "I'd say they've given us front-row seats and are distorting our view. They probably think they're honoring us with a unique experience."

"I'll take a tin can any day," Elvis replied.

Earth looked majestic, not that Bower could appreciate it as she struggled with the sense of disorientation coming from her swirling

inner ear.

As they moved out of the shadows and into the light of a new day, they could see the alien mothership looming large hundreds of miles above the Pacific Ocean so serene below. Sunlight caught the underside of the organic vessel. What had looked like fine cilia from the ground were gigantic tubular growths protruding below the craft, casting shadows along what Bower assumed was the hull. Fat fingers, sprang to mind, and Bower found herself wondering about their function, not in a mechanical sense, but from a biological perspective.

The alien vessel rotated slowly along the length of its axis.

"That's not a spaceship," Elvis said softly, and Bower nodded.

As they passed beneath the craft, traveling along the length of the alien vessel, Bower felt as though she were looking at a bacterium under an electron-scanning microscope, only this bacterium radiated color. Like a beetle's shell, the colors shifted with the light reflecting off the seemingly oily surface.

Below them, the curvature of Earth looked out of place. Whereas before they had been held spellbound by the sunlight reflecting off the azure blue waters of the Pacific, now the ocean seemed distant, as though it were incorporeal, a figment of their imagination.

The jagged coastline of South America came into view, with dark streaks of lifeless desert and rugged snow-capped mountains giving way to lush green forests, and yet their eyes were transfixed by the alien creature.

Creature, yes, thought Bower, Elvis was right. This was no spaceship, it was alive. There were no steel panels, no portholes or blinking lights. As if in response to her thoughts, Elvis murmured.

"How does this thing work? There's no machinery, no rocket engines or engine bells, no heat shields or fuel tanks."

"Nope," was all Bower could muster in response, mesmerized by the dangling alien structures sailing by above them. For some reason, they reminded her of tonsils, or perhaps they were an enlarged version of the tiny papillae covering the tongue? Whatever these structures were, they had the chaotic mesh of life about them rather than the clinical, deliberate placement of mechanical parts.

The floater should have prepared them for this sight, but the sheer size of the alien vessel defied the imagination, and yet it was no vessel, not in any sense they had ever known. This was a living organism on a scale that dwarfed life on Earth. Was it a hundred miles long, two hundred miles?

They skimmed beneath the creature, in awe of the living structure drifting lazily above the thin blue atmosphere of Earth.

"How big is this thing?" Elvis asked.

"She's bigger than either Switzerland or Belgium," Bower replied.

“Denmark, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, take your pick.”

“In US speak?”

“Ah,” Bower said, not taking her eyes off the craft as she added, “at a guess, I’d say bigger than Connecticut, New Jersey, New Hampshire, maybe even Vermont… I don’t know.”

“Damn.”

Slowly, their course took them in among the fleshy, hanging pods. Each appendage was easily the size of a skyscraper, and like a cityscape, no two pods reached exactly the same height.

As they drifted between these alien structures, Bower wasn’t sure who was upside-down. With their smooth curves and rounded tops, the pods looked fleshy. The two unwitting astronauts glided between the pods, curving around them as they moved closer to the body of the creature.

“I wanna go home.”

Bower thought they were her words, certainly she felt that way, but it was Elvis who had spoken.

“Me too.”

Elvis held her hand, squeezing tightly as their forward motion slowed and they drifted upward toward a dark, irregular shaped hole at the base of one of the appendages.

“You know,” Elvis said, with a change of tone that signaled an attempt at humor, “If I hadn’t seen Sigourney Weaver in Aliens, this would be quite exciting. Oh, God, please don’t let anything jump out at me from the shadows.”

Bower forced herself to make a nervous laugh as they passed into the darkness.

Distances were hard to judge. There were no points of reference, no familiar shapes with which to relate sizes. What’s more, the creature seemed to swell, with sections stretching and contracting, undulating and pulsating.

Darkness enveloped them, swallowing them. Elvis held her hand tight. Bower squeezed as hard as she could, focusing on the sensation beneath her fingers, assuring herself he was still there.

Slowly, their eyes adjusted to the night.

“We’re in the belly of the beast, now,” Elvis said.

“You’re not helping,” Bower replied, her heart pounding within her chest as they passed through a dark opening on the surface of the alien vessel.

They found themselves standing on the upper edge of the broad hole inside the vast creature. Instinctively, Bower stepped forward, wanting to move away from the dark chasm behind them. Her feet drifted lazily through the air.

Streaks of soft red light stretched out inside the empty, cavernous

void. Faint strips of semi-transparent blood-red light moved in swirling motions, crisscrossing and intersecting each other as they faded into the distance.

Bower looked down. Her feet rested in soft sand. She crouched, but that act caused her to drift off the ground and she watched, fascinated as she drifted back to the sand in slow motion. Her boots barely made any indentation. Elvis still held her hand, but not as forcefully.

Bower picked up a handful of sand and stood up again, feeling as light as a feather as she bobbed up and down with even the slightest motion. She ran the sand through her fingers, watching as the fine grains fell slowly to the ground. Although they glistened like stars, the grains of sand drifted like snowflakes in no rush to end their fall.

The sand felt moist and was surprisingly warm.

Sand dunes rolled away before her.

A light breeze blew from her left, but the air felt dank, heavy. Bower couldn't place the sensation, but the air felt thick. She wondered about its composition and pressure. There had to be oxygen, or they wouldn't be able to breathe, but she was curious about the ratio. Breathing deeply, she felt no need to rush for another breath.

"What do you make of that?" Elvis asked, and she turned to him, seeing his eyes cast upwards.

Blobs of molten fluid floated above them, defying what little gravity there was within the creature. From what she could tell, each blob would have been thirty to forty feet in diameter. Although they glowed like lava, she doubted they were hot. She wasn't sure why, but something about the appearance of these blobs suggested they were cool to touch. Perhaps it was the lack of any shimmer in the air. The blobs undulated, with soft waves rippling back and forth, causing their shape to flex and distort as they drifted onward.

Now her eyes had adjusted to the darkness, she could make out thin streaks of dim red light stretching across the sky like pathways, winding their way between floating islands of light sparkling in the darkness.

"Beautiful," was the only word that sprang to mind, the only word to pass from her lips. Any fear she held evaporated with the wonder around them. In the distance, several more blobs of glowing lava-like fluid rose up in long strands before breaking free and drifting onward.

Stella appeared in front of them. Suddenly there were dozens of aliens swarming past. Their spindly, spiky carriages wheeled around them as they raced across the sand and into one of the transparent red strands that crossed the crest of a low hill. Bower watched in awe as

each one was lifted up and whisked away by the light. It was as though they were leaves falling in a stream.

Three of the alien creatures paused before them. Which one was Stella?

"Come."

"…With."

"……Us."

Elvis held out his hand, not sure which creature he should reach toward.

"I don't get it," Elvis said. "Stella?"

"Yes."

"…Yes."

"……Yes."

"They're smaller," Bower said. "Not the frames, but the core."

"I don't understand," Elvis said. "How can there be three of them?"

"I guess there was always three of them," Bower replied. She laughed, adding, "We've assumed so much, too much. These things, these spindly structures, they're like a life-raft. They must have pooled their resources, banded together."

"I'm confused," Elvis said.

"You're confused? Me too. Imagine how they must have felt when we treated the three of them as a single individual."

"Huh," Elvis said. "So all these little critters made up three people."

"People?" Bower asked.

"You know what I mean," Elvis protested. "Three whatevers, three thinking personalities."

"I guess so."

Whatever Stella was, she seemed to understand their conceptual difficulties. The three alien structures reached out, touching each other, their fronds intertwining. To Bower's amazement, the tiny creatures at the heart of the bladed structures swarmed back and forth, swapping between the frames.

"This is screwing with my head," Elvis confessed.

"I think this is what they wanted us to see. They want us to understand what they are, how they operate, how they're interchangeable, how their intelligence is comprised of numerous component parts.

"For us, it's all too easy to get caught up in macroscopic life. We look at each other and we see eyes and hair, arms and legs, and we think these things define us, but they don't. Our bodies are a projection of trillions of cells, each of them far too small to be seen by the human eye. What seems so alien to us is actually the norm.

Microscopic biology has defined life on Earth for billions of years, and microbes like bacteria and archaea reside in swarms like these aliens."

Bower crouched down, taking a good look at the mass of creatures switching back and forth between the three separate cores. She was sure they were listening, thinking, evaluating her words. They seemed as intent on observing her and Elvis as the two of them were on understanding these alien creatures.

"I've been thinking about Stella. Did you see the way she merged in with the swarm of other bugs?"

"Yeah, how does that work?" Elvis asked. "I mean, what was with that? Was she just part of some other, bigger creature? And what is she now? Is she like a team of aliens or something?"

"I don't know," Bower said, "but we're not that much different. We like to think of ourselves as individuals, as a single entity, but we're not. We're composite creatures, made up of billions and billions of other creatures. Your body is an ecosystem in its own right, every bit as remarkable as the rainforest or the islands of the Galapagos. Boy, if only Salvador Dali had known, what paintings he could have created."

Bugs flowed freely between the three spindly alien structures as if they were consciously reinforcing her point.

Elvis didn't seem convinced. To Bower, the expression on his face was one of skepticism.

"You'd be surprised," she continued, looking up at him in the soft, red light. "There are tiny mites that are only ever found on human eyelashes and nose hairs, beards and the like. Oh, and what a grand time they have. They defecate, fornicate and raise entire families on your face and no amount of washing will get rid of them."

She laughed as he screwed up his face.

"But they're harmless. They're simply along for the ride. And they're not alone. There's roughly a hundred trillion individual organisms that call you home."

"Hah!" Elvis cried.

"I'm not kidding. Microbes out-number the cells of our body ten-to-one. They're found mostly in the gut, only they're so small compared to our body cells that they live among them like squirrels in the forest.

"On your skin alone, there are hundreds of different species of bacteria, and far from making you dirty, they keep you healthy. In your gut and bowel there's at least five hundred different, living species of bacteria, numbering in their billions to trillions. I say, living, even though the term is redundant, because these billions of bacteria are alive in their own right. They're just as alive as you and me. Without them, there's the very real possibility we could die.

“Chow down on a burger because you’re hungry and you think you’re feeding yourself, but you’re not, you’re feeding the zoo in your gut. Only the creatures in this zoo break down carbohydrates and make nutrients for you, like Vitamin K and Vitamin B12.”

“No shit,” Elvis replied.

“Oh, don’t get me started on the micro-biome of feces,” Bower added, playing with him. “People get so darn paranoid about cleanliness. Everything’s got to be sterile. I’ll let you in on a little secret: Nothing is sterile, at least not for long. And that’s not such a bad thing. Microbes are everywhere. Microbes rule Earth, but they’re humble folk, letting us take the glory.”

“You’re making my skin crawl, Doc,” Elvis replied.

“It was already crawling,” Bower said, grinning.

Elvis shuddered.

“Think about Africa,” Bower added, noting that the cores of the three alien entities had separated again. “There’s no one species that defines the continent, but between lions and zebra, crocodiles and snakes, wildebeest and leopards, acacia trees and the long grasses of the Kalahari, we form a view of Africa that is more than a single landmass. In the same way, humanity is more than one species comprised of 23 chromosome pairs, we’ve evolved as the host for hundreds of other species, and we depend on them as much as they depend on us. I suspect the same is true of these alien creatures as well.”

“So,” Elvis replied. “You’re trying to say, I’m not me?”

“I’m saying, you are y’all.”

Elvis laughed, clearly appreciating her translation into southern US terminology.

“And there’s so many misconceptions in this regard,” Bower continued. “No one likes catching a cold, but viruses aren’t always the bad guys. There are phages that look like miniature Moon Landers, like something from a game of Space Invaders, and they’ll land on hostile bacteria and destroy them with the ruthless efficiency of an invading army, and all without any acknowledgment or gratitude from us, their overlord hosts. Oh, and don’t get me going on the jungle that is the human mouth.”

“He he he,” Elvis chuckled. The big guy was growing on her.

“So what is Stella?” Elvis asked, gesturing toward the three prickly carriages looming patiently before them. “Is she one creature or many?”

“What are you?” Bower asked in response. “Are you one creature or many?”

“Ha,” Elvis replied. “Very good, doc.”

The creatures began rolling away from them, calling out as they

climbed the sand dune.

"Come."

"…With."

"……Us."

Was this an invitation or a command?

Either way, what choice did they have?

# Chapter 17: Xenophobia

Elvis stepped forward, following as the creatures thrashed their way across the sand, their fronds slapping at the ground as they sprang out in low gravity.

Bower felt as though she were moving through treacle or wading through waist-deep water, although she knew that was the wrong analogy as nothing held her back. Her footsteps unfolded in slow motion, and she felt like she was walking on the Moon. With each step, she hung in the air like a ballerina.

As they reached the crest of the nearest dune, each of the Stellas peeled away into the air, being caught in the flowing red stream of light.

"What is that?" Elvis asked.

"Your guess is as good as mine," Bower replied.

"Looks like a freeway in the sky," he added as he watched the three aliens they'd once called Stella take flight. The creatures cartwheeled like tumbleweeds as they flew through the air, twisting and turning, racing into the distance.

"Come on," said Elvis.

"Hold on a minute, cowboy. We have no idea what that stream will do to the human body. Look at it, it's accelerating them from a standing start to, what? Fifty, sixty miles an hour in just a few seconds."

"Yeah, so?"

"Our bodies weren't designed to withstand those kind of stresses," Bower said. "For us, that will be like a car crash in reverse, although the damage will be the same."

"You think too much, Doc," Elvis replied, reaching out with his hand and touching at the stream of red light running through the air. His fingers dipped into the light like he was touching a fast flowing stream. The three alien creatures whipped by overhead, following some other semi-visible track through the dark sky before disappearing from sight.

"Elvis, I'm serious. The speeds being reached up there are more than our fragile bodies can stand. They're moving at hundreds of miles an hour. Even if we're OK stepping into that stream, what about stopping at the other end? We're overripe peaches. Our bodies can't withstand sudden acceleration or deceleration, our internal organs are vulnerable to bruising and bleeding."

Elvis wasn't listening.

"You know what the difference is between us, Doc?"

Bower was silent.

“Roller-coasters. You need to know it’s safe before you’ll go for a ride. Me, I’ll jump in the front carriage to find out.”

“ELVIS,” she yelled, but she was too late. He jumped and was whisked away, horizontally at first, but he quickly shot high into the air, twisting and turning as his body followed the contorted beam.

“ELVVVVVIS.”

The three alien creatures came sailing back, passing the other way along the beam, crossing in front of Elvis as he spread his arms, soaring like a bird.

“YEEEEE HAW,” he cried. “Come on, Doc.”

He was right. If this were a theme park, Bower would have gone to get some cotton candy. She’d have been the one holding the bags, or the jackets while the others went on the ride. Every ounce of her body screamed, no, but she knew she had to go with him. It was either that or sit there on the sand dunes waiting for a ride home. Against her better judgment, she jumped.

Bower felt as though she’d run into a wall of water, as though she’d slipped and fallen face first into a swimming pool. She found herself tumbling through the air, flaying around like a rag doll in a dryer.

“Spread your wings, babe.”

Elvis was beside her.

How did he do that? He was flying beside her. He reached out and steadied her, helping her orient her body in the direction of travel. Bower breathed deeply, calming herself. Her muscles relaxed, and that seemed to be the key to flight within the slipstream.

She smiled. She could do this. She could fly. Was this a daydream? A childhood fantasy come true? She laughed, feeling like a kid.

“Pretty darn cool, huh,” Elvis said.

“Pretty darn cool indeed,” she replied, as they raced above the dark, rolling sand dunes.

The distant strands converged on nodes in the sky, like roads leading to Rome. In her mind, Bower found herself making comparisons to the way the cardiovascular system worked, certainly the red pathways reminded her of veins converging on arteries, all leading back to the heart. They were sinuous, meandering, not taking the most direct route.

The three alien creatures drifted by, spinning idly so as to dismiss any notion of any one particular direction being upright for them. As they soared along the floating highway, Bower found she had some directional control by twisting. That must have been how Elvis had been able to reach her.

As they gained height, she could see numerous hubs or nodes

running the length of the craft. The nodes spidered in irregular shapes, reaching out with thin veins cutting through the air. Thousands upon thousands of alien creatures like the three Stellas raced along the various pathways, hurriedly going about their business. Rush hour in orbit.

Together, Bower and Elvis passed through a central node and emerged into the light. They had broken through cloud cover, coming out from the darkness into the bright light of day.

"What the hell is this thing?" Elvis asked, soaring beside her. "I mean, it's not a spacecraft, not as we'd think of one."

"Why leave your planet?" Bower asked, "when you can take it with you."

Dark cloud-tops rolled beneath them. They were still inside the vast alien ship; that much was obvious from the transparent dome stretching out easily ten miles above them. Here and there, lines were visible, crisscrossing the dome, providing some sort of structural support.

"Are those stars?" Elvis asked, pointing at several massive clusters of light further down the body of the vast creature. Bower couldn't bring herself to think of the alien vessel as a spaceship, it was a living organism, or at the very least, an ecosystem.

"I don't think so."

There were dozens of clusters, each one rising above the clouds with thousands of tiny lights glowing like the sun.

As their path took them closer, they saw that what looked like thousands of miniature stars resolved into hundreds of thousands and millions of fine pinpricks of light, all tightly grouped together in structures that reached up for miles above them.

"They're trees," Bower said.

"Trees?"

"Yes, look at the structure, look at how they're connected."

As they wove their way between the gigantic structures towering over them, Bower could see fine, silk-like threads grouping the lights together, banding them into twigs, branches, limbs and various central trunks.

"Trees?" Elvis repeated, clearly struggling with her analogy, but that was all she could come up with to describe what she was looking at.

Each tree of light spanned several square miles, reaching up at least a mile or two in height. They were lopsided, lacking symmetry, often with vast blooms of light in one area or another, while other sections were hollow, devoid of light, allowing them to see through to the interconnected core within.

Around each base, roots spread out across the cloud tops, a

tangled mess set in stark contrast to the neatly branching structures reaching up toward the lights. In some cases, the roots of several trees were interconnected. In almost all cases, the lights on the roots reached out beyond the farthest branch.

"Understand," Stella said, although Bower wasn't sure which Stella had spoken.

They slowed as they came up to an irregular tree standing on its own. Millions of pinpricks of light spread out through its root ball, reaching for miles beyond the largest of the branches. The inside of the tree looked dead, with just a smattering of lights at various junctions, but the outer branches teemed with life.

Life, that was it. Bower understood what she was looking at.

Slowly, they drifted to within a few feet of the various twigs stemming from the branches of the largest limb. Bower reached out and touched at the lights, half-knowing what to expect.

A beetle.

At least to her it looked like a beetle, and it wasn't quite what she expected, but it was life. She'd figured she would see something associated with terrestrial life.

Floating before her was a beautiful scarab beetle with six spiky legs, its iridescent shell glistening in the sunlight.

"I don't get it?" Elvis said. "What the hell is that?"

"It's a beetle," Bower replied.

"I know it's a beetle, but what's a beetle doing in space?"

Bower heard his reply, but his words didn't register. She ran her hand over the other pinpricks of light. She watched with childlike amazement as the image of various beetles appeared above each of the fine pinpricks of light. The beetles varied in size and shape, their colors, the textures on their shells, and the length of their legs, but the variation was ordered. If she moved in one direction, the beetles changed in coloration while their shells slowly elongated.

Bower was fascinated by the beauty before her. Hints of turquoise gave way to scarlet red, shades of orange and yellow. The specimens were ordered, clustered together on various related twigs and branches.

As her hand left each section, the beetles there disappeared from sight, returning to pinpricks of white light.

Bower found she was neutrally buoyant, weightless. Reaching out, she could propel herself by pulling on the stiff structure. As she skimmed slowly along the surface of the tree, barely half a foot away from the glowing lights, beetles continued to appear before her. Their abdomens would swell in one direction, while their mandibles and antennae would increase in another, and always with an astonishing variety of color. For her, it was as though the insects had been dipped

in a rainbow.

Elvis came up beside her as she examined one of the beetles in detail.

Bower found that if she worked with her hands she could enlarge, rotate and manipulate the three-dimensional image before her. Zooming in, she found the view before her continued to expand. She was able to zero in on a single strand of hair on the head, and from that point, closed in on the insect's compound eye.

"As freaky as that is," Elvis began, "it doesn't look out of place here."

Bower moved closer, and the hundreds of segments within the eye slowly increased in size until she had focused on just one dark panel.

Bower was smiling like a kid on Christmas day as she said, "I think I understand what we're looking at here."

Elvis was quiet.

She was sure he was itching to ask her to explain further, but, like her, he was in awe of the view around them. Within seconds, they were at the resolution of an electron microscope, and still she could zoom further, constantly plunging her hand in close to the point of focus and then slowly drawing back. What had looked like the smooth, curving outer wall of a single eye segment now looked ragged and pitted, like the surface of the Moon.

Bower zoomed still closer.

Slowly, cells came into view, and then cilia on the cell walls along with a clearly defined nucleus within. There were ribosomes, mitochondria, lysomes, all the various elements she remembered from her university days. And, coiled up in the nucleus, there were chromosomes. Moving closer, the tightly wound double helix was visible, as were the individual nucleic acids linked in lumpy pairs, forming rungs on the ladder of life.

Bower put her hand back by her side and the image faded, returning them to the sea of stars on the vast, sprawling tree.

"Is that it?" Elvis asked. "Is that what they came for? Beetles?"

"Not just beetles," Bower replied, gesturing to the gigantic tree towering thousands of feet above them. "All of life."

She pointed at the lights glistening in the thicket of roots hundreds of feet below them, stretching out across the cloud tops like a tangled bush.

"Do you see that? Do you see the way the matt and tangle down there looks like a root-bound plant? At a guess, I'd say that's the microbial world, with its reliance on asexual reproduction and horizontal gene transfer. Oh, my mother and father would love this stuff."

“Did you say horizontal sex?” Elvis asked. From his tone, Bower knew he was being facetious.

Bower went to repeat herself, and then thought of a simpler explanation in just two words. “No sex.”

“No sex,” Elvis repeated, looking at the roots as they crisscrossed each other. “Bummer.”

Bower laughed. “This is the tree of life. For the most part, complex organisms rely on sex passing gradual, successive change down through countless generations, and in this way, life has slowly branched out from a common point of origin, just like a tree, but microbes are more like a public library, constantly swapping books between themselves.”

“Huh,” Elvis replied.

She could see he was lost in thought.

“Like a library?” Elvis said absentmindedly. From his tone of voice, she could tell this wasn’t a question, it was an inquisitive statement.

Bower felt jubilant, playful. She wasn’t sure why, perhaps it was the excitement of discovery, but in that moment she felt mischievous.

“Are you feeling a little like those microbes in the library?” she asked. “Not getting any sex?”

Elvis bust out laughing. That got his attention, she thought, smiling.

“No, it’s not that,” he replied, grinning. “When you said, library, it sparked something in my thinking.”

Elvis turned, gesturing to the other trees dotting the celestial plane, each of them resplendent with millions of lights glowing like stars.

“Perhaps that’s what this is,” he said. “Some kind of interstellar library.”

Bower was surprised by Elvis; he’d made a remarkably astute observation, one she’d overlooked.

“Do you think,” he began hesitantly. “Do you think those other trees would show us life on other worlds?”

Elvis seemed unsure of himself. He shouldn’t have been, she figured.

They were both out of their element, but given her upbringing at the feet of a university biology professor, Bower was comfortable with what she was seeing. Whenever her mother had lacked a babysitter, she’d taken young Elizabeth Bower into her lectures, setting her to one side with some dolls and coloring pencils while she taught. In the same way in which most kids would play with Lego blocks, Bower had fond memories of playing with anatomical models of the brain and a segmented model of a frog. She’d spent her childhood playing with

fake hearts and not-so-fake skeletons. And yet, she hadn't seen this. Elvis was right. She smiled at his insight. For all his gun-toting, macho image, he'd seen something she missed, and that impressed her.

"Yes," she said, knowing the certainty in her voice would give him confidence

"So they're like scientists, or something?" he asked.

"I guess so. I suspect if we examined this tree in detail, we'd be able to trace life back to its origins. See those inner nodes, devoid of light? Those are the extinct parent species that led down to this point. Once, they shone like these species do today."

"So this is like missing links and stuff?" Elvis asked.

His voice carried a slight hint of disdain, and Bower wondered about his upbringing, if he'd been exposed to creationist dogma instead of science.

"There are no missing links," Bower replied gently, feeling she needed to take some time to clarify this point. "We may not have seen all the links, but none of them are missing. Chronologically, the chain is unbroken. If it weren't, these life forms wouldn't exist."

Elvis was silent, and she suspected he wasn't convinced.

"Evolution can seem a little intimidating, but it's actually quite simple. Animals are like a lump of soft plastic. You can shape them. We do this all the time. Ten thousand years ago, there were no dogs. Wolves roamed the wilds. Not only did we tame them, we molded them to suit our every whim and fancy. We bred them selectively over countless generations to form Chihuahuas and Great Danes.

"And today, you might ask, where are the missing links between them? Where are the Great Chihuahuas? And of course, there are none. Chihuahuas and Great Danes aren't linked to each other, they're linked backwards in time, through some distant, common ancestor not too far removed from a wolf.

"When it comes to natural selection the only difference is, nobody chose to have thousands of species of beetles. They are the result of selective pressure from predators and disease, limited food and even things as seemingly innocuous as fussy females or feisty males.

"I know it's hard to imagine, but the largest trees on Earth were once seedlings, and the same is true of life springing forth from its humble beginnings billions of years ago."

"Huh," was all she could get out of Elvis. He was non-committal. Well, she thought, we all need baby steps.

The Stellas were becoming agitated, circling around them in the air.

"Come," they said in unison.

Although this was a request, Bower felt herself pulled away from the tree as though she were caught in a rip at the beach, being

dragged with the swell of the waves.

"No! We need more time," she cried.

Bower and Elvis were caught in an updraft, swirling high above the massive tree-like structures with their clusters of star-like lights glowing beneath them.

From up high, they could see the breadth and length of the alien vessel, if it could be called a vessel. To the rear of the craft, easily a hundred miles away, a vast rocky cliff arose. At that distance, the sharp shapes were impossible to resolve into anything other than a ragged mountain range breaking through the cloud tops.

The transparent dome stretched out overhead. Beyond the dome, Bower could see the gently curving slope of Earth passing to one side of the craft. She had given up on trying to figure out which way was up. In space, all ways were up, and yet without realizing it, she'd instinctively assumed up was aligned with the craft, but the alien vessel must have been positioned almost side-on to Earth, making her feel lopsided once she saw the planet. Earth curved away before them.

The sun set. For Bower, the view was counterintuitive. On Earth, sunset was marked by a tiny glowing ball of fire slowly dipping below an immense horizon. In space, sunset was sudden. Earth simply blocked the nearest star for a short while.

As they flew on within the vast alien craft, Bower felt she could have reached out and touched the dome, but the slick surface was probably still hundreds of feet above them. The dome was comprised of interlocking hexagonal tiles as clear as glass, with just the finest of seams running between them. Bower felt as though she were on the inside of a gigantic compound eye, looking out from within some vast insect as someone else looked in.

Their flight-path took them forward to the bow of the great interstellar ship, where most of the alien activity seemed to concentrate.

"I will never get used to that," Elvis said, pointing at hundreds of spiky red aliens blowing past them like tumbleweeds.

They descended into what looked like an open football stadium, with thousands of tiered levels enclosing a low platform. The three alien creatures they'd once affectionately referred to as Stella touched down gracefully before them.

As her altitude fell and her forward momentum slowed, Bower turned to land on her feet. She found herself reaching for the ground but not feeling it as she slowed to a pace no quicker than a light walk, drifting just inches from the platform. Finally, her feet touched gently on the ground. Sand crunched beneath her boots.

The three creatures that were once Stella wheeled around the edge of the platform some thirty or forty feet away. Their behavior

was erratic, as was that of the crowd before them. Bower couldn't help but wonder if they were appealing to the vast alien audience, telling them something about their harrowing escape from Earth.

After several minutes, they returned to her and Elvis and spoke as the crowd settled.

"You."

"…Must."

"……Speak."

Elvis looked at Bower. She wasn't sure what these creatures wanted them to say, and she felt a little cheated that Elvis had looked at her before she could look to him. Somehow, she'd been volunteered.

Bower raised her hand, hoping a flat palm was a universal gesture of openness and friendship, although she doubted that kind of body language extended beyond Earth.

There was considerable noise within the stadium, and Bower doubted her voice would be heard.

Thousands of alien creatures thronged the tiered platforms enclosing them, their fronds waving, slapping against each other and the ground as they moved around.

"Ah, hi."

Bower cringed, but she took solace in the fact no one could hear her.

In that instant, the amphitheater fell deathly silent.

A blinding light shone down upon them as darkness descended on the stadium. Bower covered her eyes, struggling to adjust to the influx of light. She squinted, barely able to see Elvis less than a couple of feet from her. In that moment, the pitch-black darkness beyond the light seemed to stretch on into eternity.

She turned, but couldn't see anything beyond the small halo of light surrounding the two of them. It was as though reality had dissolved, leaving them isolated.

A voice spoke, uttering one word.

"Why?"

The voice was male. For the first time, this wasn't Bower's voice repeated back to her. That one word echoed throughout the stadium, having come from all around them.

Elvis turned through three hundred and sixty degrees, half-crouching as he did so, as though he felt threatened. Bower felt it too. The tension in the air was unbearable.

"Why?" she repeated softly, aware the acoustics within the amphitheater were carrying her voice. Honestly, she felt this was a question these alien creatures should be answering. She wasn't sure what they wanted to hear from her. One word could not be considered

a sentence, let alone a question, while hers were the only actions she could speak to, so she cleared her throat and spoke with measured deliberation.

"We were trapped, captured. We had to escape."

The silence within the stadium was eerie. Bower felt she had to speak, if only to break through the haunting quiet.

"We were imprisoned with your pilot."

Was that it? Was that what they wanted to hear? Did they want to know what motivated her to help Stella? Even with Elvis standing just a few feet away, Bower felt alone, vulnerable. She felt as though the white light shining down upon them passed straight through her, as though this alien species was sitting in judgment of her.

"Your pilot killed our friend, but I knew… I knew there had to be more… I couldn't believe she meant us harm… I couldn't believe you had come all this way to destroy life…"

Bower paused, wondering how much they had understood.

"Why?"

Although it was just one word, the tone was different. A woman had spoken.

Bower was confused. She needed more context. A single word was not enough. They wanted her to explain herself, but she didn't understand why she needed to. And there was no interest in how, no interest in what she and Elvis had gone through. Motive and intent were the only priority.

"Why did I help your pilot? Because that's what it means to be intelligent. Anything less would have been wrong. Sure, I was frightened. I was afraid."

Elvis spoke up.

"Fear makes people do stupid things, but we knew we had to help your pilot."

Pilot or pilots? Was that an accurate description of the three Stellas? Did the term pilot translate? Bower wasn't sure.

"War."

Bower swallowed. At the very least, they were moving away from interrogatives and on to nouns, but she'd have preferred a noun that wasn't so pregnant with meaning. She wanted a sentence, a conversation, a discussion.

"We were at war," Elvis said. "You must understand war, the clash and conflict that follows power. But war is not our default. The war in Malawi was forced on us."

Elvis paused. Bower could see he was looking for a response but none came.

"To have not gone to war would have been to give in to those who would abuse their power over others. War is never symmetrical.

The strong prey on the weak. We chose to stand up against that wrong."

Bower held her hand out, signaling for Elvis to stop. He may not have felt it, but she thought they were asking why humanity had waged war against them. She doubted they cared for Malawi.

For Bower, the terrifying thing about standing there in the light was the implication of the darkness. The pitch black beyond tormented her. She wanted to see them, to observe this alien congress as it made its deliberation, but instead she faced the cold night. For humanity, black had always represented death, but why? Darkness held the unknown. Darkness was beyond sight. Darkness was beyond control.

Stella and her kind were out there in the darkness. They weren't dumb. They clearly understood English and could communicate, and yet they chose to get her and Elvis talking. Bower couldn't shake the feeling her words were being weighed carefully, with judicious precision.

Elvis must have sensed that too, as he continued softly, saying. "When you arrived, we mistook your floaters for an invasion fleet, for an act of aggression, but that was a mistake."

"Peace," echoed out from the darkness.

"Yes, yes, I know," Bower snapped, surprising herself. She wanted to see them, to address them in person and not from this prison of light. She slowed herself down, saying, "We heard you, but we did not believe you. We were afraid."

She swallowed the lump in her throat. The thought of speaking on behalf of humanity as a whole intimidated her. The pressure bore down on her like a lead weight.

"You must have seen the hornets," she began, pointing out into the darkness, gesturing toward where she imagined the tree of lights stood. "For you, arriving on Earth must have been like knocking over a hornet's nest.

"All of life on Earth is hostile. Life fights to survive, surely that is the same elsewhere."

The silence that followed her statement seemed to condemn her.

"But now we understand," she said. "We've seen the tree of life. Your ship is one of discovery, a research vessel. We have had many such vessels ourselves. From the Santa Maria to the HMS Endeavor and the Beagle, we too have explored in peace. We too have sought to learn, to explore, to understand."

A dark shape moved on the edge of her vision, staying in the shadows. Bower squinted, making out the silhouette of a man standing just outside the light.

"They are endemic, diseased," the man began, speaking with a

neutral English accent, one she couldn't place. "They war against themselves, they decimate their own planet. They are barbarians, base and brute, to be culled for the better of all."

"There is intelligence," a woman's voice replied, and Bower could see her vague outline next to his.

Bower went to move forward, but her feet wouldn't respond, leaving her stranded, bathed in the brilliant, white light. It wasn't that she couldn't move, but that her strength faltered and she found herself shaking.

"Where there is intelligence," the woman continued, "there is hope."

"They are mindless," the male voice replied. "They destroy habitat, drive species to extinction."

"But there is reason," the woman protested.

"Reason enslaved by instinct," the man said.

Bower turned, following them as they walked around her and Elvis, staying in the shadows.

"Who are they?" Elvis asked.

Bower was silent.

The woman replied coldly, saying, "We… are you."

As she stepped forward into the light, Bower got her first good look at this strange woman. She was well over six feet tall and dressed in a long, flowing garment accentuating her height. Light played on her silky, white dress, giving off the subtle hues of the rainbow. Her arms were thin, almost anemic, while her skin appeared jaundiced. Her long straight hair was jet black in stark contrast to her soft features, while her eyes were a soft brown.

"I don't understand," Elvis said. Even he looked short compared to her.

Bower stood a mere five foot six inches and felt dwarfed by the thin woman.

The man stepped into the light beside her, easily seven feet in height, but equally as thin.

The woman spoke again, saying, "Based on our observation of naturally selective and sexually selective pressures within your species, and taking into account previous rates of genetic mutation, we are your future. Within fifty thousand stellar orbits, your species will approximate this state."

Bower was stunned. She was speechless. Elvis, though, seemed quick to realize there was something cryptic and implicit in their appearance. He was astute, asking, "What is it you mean to do?"

The man ignored him, saying, "We have come many times before, sampling your world, observing progress."

"Before?" Bower asked. "When?"

The woman answered. “By your reckoning, this would be measured with a frequency of millions of orbits. But never before have we seen such domination of the biosphere by a single species. You number in excess of seven billion. Each year, your births outweigh deaths by seventy million, causing your ranks to swell even further. Such increase is not sustainable, not without consequence. And so, you have achieved a hundred times the biomass of any large animal species we have previously encountered.”

The man’s voice was harsh, as though he were speaking out of bitterness.

“You have humbled nature. You have removed the natural checks on growth, but you have done so with reckless abandon, without regard for your planet and the diversity of life around you. You have lost sight of your place in nature.”

“So you’re going to interfere,” Bower said, piecing the threads of logic together.

She moved closer to Elvis. He responded, taking her hand in his. There was something eerie about their encounter with these tall humanoids, something surreal. Touch grounded her to reality. It was silly really, and yet both of them seemed to relish the touch of each other’s hand.

“We seek to restore balance,” the mysterious man replied.

“How?” Elvis asked. It was a good question, but Bower figured she already knew the answer inherent in this prophetic vision. She let go of Elvis and stepped forward within the light. Reaching out, she touched at the tall man standing before her. As she expected, her hand passed harmlessly through his ethereal image.

“We will not hurt you,” the woman said. “We mean only to remove the bias.”

“You’re going to destroy mankind,” Elvis said.

“Not destroy,” the woman responded. “Enhance.”

“But don’t you see?” Bower protested. “This is precisely what they were afraid of, this is why they lashed out at you. If you do this, you’re vindicating their madness.”

The two humanoids were silent.

“I don’t understand,” Elvis said, turning to Bower. “What are they going to do?”

“They’re not going to wipe out humanity,” Bower replied. “They’re going to change us, to transform us into this.”

“But why?” Elvis asked. “What would that accomplish?”

The woman replied, “Because the root of your irrational behavior is instinctive, inherited over thousands of generations. We will remove the source of your fear, your predication to violence, your irrational tendencies. We will lift the veil from your eyes.”

Bower understood. She looked at Elvis as she said, “They mean to fast-forward Homo sapiens to a time where these primal urges, these absolutist tendencies have mellowed.”

“Is that not what your religions ask of you?” the woman asked. “Peace on Earth?”

“He wouldn’t understand,” the man added, scorn carrying in his voice. “He is a warrior, a man of war, nothing but a brute beast.”

Elvis flinched, and Bower pulled on his arm, preventing him from stepping forward.

“Who the hell are you to sit in judgment of us?” Elvis cried, the veins in his neck standing out.

“Who are you?” the man asked in reply, raising his eyebrows. “Who gave you the right to abuse the evolutionary pedigree of almost four thousand million revolutions around this star? Who gave you the right to systematically decimate a planetary life system? You plunder and squander this planet for your own selfish ends with no regard for life.”

“You are stewards,” the woman continued in a notably calmer voice. “That is all. You are passing through, not staying. Your lives are fleeting. Your concern should be to extend the life of your planet into the future, not to exploit all you can now.”

“How long do you think Earth will survive under your reign?” the man asked. “Honestly? In the last hundred orbits, you’ve strip-mined the planet, tearing down forests, decimating ocean stocks, polluting the land and sea. How far will you go? How long will you persist at the expense of life? Another one or two hundred orbits? And then what? Then you’ll leave this planet a husk, an empty shell.”

“But you don’t know that,” Bower protested. “You don’t know where we will be in two hundred years. You’re assuming we won’t change, but you’re wrong.

“If you’ve visited our planet several times over millions of years then you must have seen tremendous change, not just in the species that roam Earth but in the very shape and position of the continents, the ice ages and dry spells. You must know that life is not static.”

Bower was driving her mind to grasp their perspective, to see her world from their point of view and hopefully find a weakness in their argument.

“Two hundred orbits is nothing,” she suggested. “For an interstellar species that catalogs worlds over millions of our years, a mere two hundred years is a blip on the radar. What if you’d turned up two hundred years ago? What if you’d seen us when horses pulled our farmer’s carts to the markets and trading ships sailed with the wind? What would your estimation of us have been then? Would you have drawn the same conclusion?”

Neither of the apparitions offered a reply.

“If you would not have condemned us then, how can you judge us now when you know not what will become of us? You might be able to simulate our evolution, but you cannot simulate our culture, our growth, our learning.”

“We will save you from yourselves,” the man said.

“You don’t even know if your intervention will work!” Bower protested. “By intervening, you could upset the balance and make things worse.”

“We won’t let you do this,” Elvis said, his lips drawn tight.

The woman addressed him, asking, “And what will you do, O man of war?”

“We’ll fight.”

The man laughed.

The woman smiled, saying, “We have seen your species before, but you have progressed rapidly. Whereas once, you roamed the grasslands in search of prey, now you revel in the luxuries of technology. You fabricate heroics, conjuring up fantasies of victory against any intrusion from the stars. You could not so much as have scratched one of our ships had we not been bound to observe. We were caught unawares. We overestimated your social cohesion and desire for harmony. We will not make that mistake again.”

“She’s right,” Bower said. “This isn’t Hollywood. There’s no Hail-Mary play to be made. This isn’t some movie where we can scrounge up a nuclear warhead from somewhere, smuggle it into the heart of the ship, and still escape in time for supper with the President. We’re like a nest of ants taking on a battleship.

“And besides, our ability to wage war is not what has set us apart from the other animals, it’s our ability to think, to reason.”

As those words left her lips, she spotted a subtle, almost imperceptible change in the demeanor of their phantom hosts. They weren’t real; she knew that. They were programmed; they had to be. They were virtual representations of the alien congress, conversing with the two of them in a more natural form. Although they were apparitions, they represented the alien position.

When they’d first spoken, there was disagreement between them. The man was more forthright, while the woman had appealed to reason as a motive to spare humanity. Without intending to, Bower had touched on that same point, and from the glitch in their response, that had struck a raw nerve.

“You’re afraid,” Bower said. “You’re afraid of what we might become, of how we might one day threaten you among the stars… Please, don’t act out of fear. If you do, you’re no better than them.”

‘Them’ had been the term Bower had unconsciously settled upon,

not us. Without realizing it, she had inadvertently transformed this debate into a three-party discussion, distinguishing both herself and Elvis from the rest of humanity and the destruction of the floaters. She hadn't accepted her position as defendant in their court.

From their silence, Bower sensed the aliens accepted her position, and that must have complicated the situation further, as that one, small word, them, implied humanity was not a cohesive group. If the alien edict didn't apply to Bower and Elvis, then there were others that could equally claim exemption, those that also detested the acts of violence unleashed upon the floaters.

"Fear is the enemy of reason," Bower said. "You must have seen that. Your pilots, those we named Stella, they must have told you about us, that we too were afraid, and yet fear need not rule over reason.

"When I first stood before Stella I was afraid, but I chose not to act out of fear. Standing there in that darkened prison, I was shaking, trembling, but I could not hurt her. Together, we reached out to each other and overcame our fears."

Neither the man nor woman replied. The man opened his lips but seemed to halt in the middle of a word, as though something was caught in his throat.

There has to be more to this, Bower thought. Although she felt as though she was speaking to two individuals, she was acutely aware the alien congress sat out there somewhere in the darkness, tens of thousands of them watching her, listening to her words. Perhaps they were divided into two camps, represented by the two humanoid apparitions she saw before her. They differed. They weren't in agreement. She could exploit this.

"As an intelligent species, we are much closer to you than you think," she said, talking not to the figures before her, but to the audience at large. To emphasize her point, she broke eye contact and turned as she spoke, ignoring the seemingly angelic representations before them and speaking directly to the extraterrestrial congress hidden in the darkness. "We may not speak the same language. We may not share the same mannerisms, but we share one thing, reason."

The two futuristic representations of humanity stood still, but not as she or Elvis would. They were frozen, nothing more than mannequins in the wax works, statues in a museum. Bower knew she had the alien congress flustered.

"We can learn. That is what has allowed us to ascend above the other animals that inhabit our world. Yes, we've made mistakes, but our strength comes not from force of arms, it comes from recognizing those mistakes and having the willingness to change."

Bower continued to ignore these futuristic doppelgängers, but out

of the corner of her eye she could see they had remained stationary, as though they were storefront dummies modeling clothing. Although there was no outward activity, she felt confident she'd unleashed a flurry of discussion behind the scenes. Doubts were rising. She had to exploit that uncertainty.

"We have struggled with the same dilemmas as you now face. For us, it was eugenics, whether to be selective with breeding, whether to sterilize our fellows based on race, class or creed so as to consciously shape the future of our species, but reason prevailed. Reason demanded equality. We have made mistakes, but reason is self-correcting."

Bower shook her head as the realization sank home.

"Look at me," she said, gesturing with her arms held wide, looking down at the dark skin on her forearms and the back of her hands. "I am a black woman. I am everything that was feared.

"Less than two hundred orbits have passed since my ancestors were freed from slavery. Barely a hundred orbits have passed since women of any color were granted the most basic of rights, that of the right to vote and be heard as individuals. And yet just over fifty orbits ago, I could not have sat on a bus next to a white man like Elvis, and all because of a layer of pigmentation that sits no more than a millimeter beneath my skin."

Bower breathed deeply, composing herself, surprised by the upswell of emotion within. She forced herself to go on.

"And yet these orbits have come and gone and we have changed. We have moved on. Those that were once despised are now heroes, and not because they fought in a physical battle, because they stood for what was right."

Bower wasn't too sure how well her point communicated. Would these creatures even know what a bus was? Would they have access to the historical records that would explain the life of Rosa Parks? Would they at least recognize the principle?

"Barely five hundred orbits ago," she continued, using their terminology. "We thought Earth was the center of this vast universe. We thought stars were but a pinprick of light, smaller than a grain of sand, and yet slowly we have learned to expand our thinking to match reality."

"When I was a child," Elvis said, stepping softly into the discussion, "I spoke as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child; but when I became a man, I put away childish things."

"Yes, yes," Bower replied, turning to Elvis, surprised by his insight.

"Hey, Southern Baptist upbringing. It's got to be good for something, right?"

Bower smiled, shaking her head. She turned to address the darkness yet again. “And we’re still in our adolescence, still in our infancy, but we’re learning to put away the toys. Science has allowed us to become adults.”

The two humanoid figures faded into the darkness, but that didn’t deter Bower.

“I understand why you came here. I understand why you feel we must change, but we need time to grow up. For too long, we’ve valued the wrong things. We’ve valued gold and diamonds, but perhaps it has taken your visit to our small planet to show us where the true riches lie.

“You crossed the countless miles of interstellar space not to plunder our world for minerals, not to take our water or our wealth, but to sample the greatest treasure in the universe, to explore life. And I see that now, I understand there is no more precious commodity than the life that surrounds us. From the smallest microbe to the largest mammal, life commands reverence.

“I don’t know how you mean to bring about this biological change to humanity, whether it is by means of some DNA-altering virus or by tampering with our ecology, but I implore you to see reason.”

Bower could feel Elvis shaking. His hand trembled in hers, but not out of anger, and perhaps not out of fear either. She felt it too, it was the awe, the intimidation of the moment.

“Put yourself in our shoes,” she continued, wondering how well such an idiom would translate. “What if it was your adolescence that was stolen from you? What if some other alien intelligence fast-tracked your progress to the stars? What if they robbed you of the chance to learn for yourself?”

Suddenly, the violent rumble of thunder broke around her. Bower found herself instinctively cringing beneath the breaking, raw power above in the darkness.

Was she right? Was this what they had endured? Were they playing out the same paternal acts that had once been forcibly imposed on them? Had their innocence been taken from them? On one hand, she wanted to ask, but deep down she felt these were questions she didn’t need answered. She felt she knew the answer.

In the darkness beyond the light, thunder rolled, staggering around her, giving her a sense of an immense void above. What did this mean? Had she said too much? She had to close this out, to solidify her argument.

“Of all the lessons we have learned, the greatest is what it means to have contact with another interstellar intelligence. You must give us time to learn from this.”

Bower paused, breathing deeply before presenting her final appeal.

"Your restraint is the only possible answer. To intervene would prove mankind was right to be afraid of you. To intervene is to admit reason has failed both species."

Bower was exasperated. She didn't know what more she could say.

The brilliant white light saturating the ground immediately around them vanished, plunging them into pitch black darkness as the thunder continued to rumble.

The ground beneath them shuddered and Bower dropped to her knees, feeling the warm sand beneath her hands.

"What's going on?" she called out.

Elvis touched her arm, saying, "Don't be afraid."

She wanted to believe him, but words were cheap, meaningless. Bower was terrified. The ground beneath her pitched and tilted. Even though she was crouched on all fours, she lost her balance and fell sideways against Elvis in the darkness. He put his arm around her, holding her tight.

"It's OK," he said. "We're going to be OK."

How did he know that? Her rational mind demanded answers, reasons. He had no way of knowing they would be OK, and still the sandy ground shook beneath them. They were sinking. Bower could feel the sand shaking, enveloping her legs.

They dropped, plunging into the darkness. One moment, she felt as though she was sinking in quicksand, the next she seemed to be in free-fall. The sandy floor dropped away. She could still feel the sand beneath her fingers, but it no longer provided any substance. She felt detached from the ground, as though the cable in an elevator had snapped and she was plunging down a darkened shaft.

In the chaos of the moment, the only constant was Elvis. He never let her go, and she found herself clinging to him as she screamed.

Bower shut her eyes. They were useless in the darkness, but she shut them anyway, if only to mentally shut out what was happening to her. She had to hold on, to endure, to make it through the moment. Still the ground shook, and then as suddenly as it had begun, the tremors stopped. The sand seemed to surge beneath her before settling.

Bower could hear the sound of the ocean.

Waves lapped at the shore.

She opened her eyes, as did Elvis. They were kneeling on a beach at night. Moonlight lit up the shore. Palm trees swayed in the breeze. Leaves rustled as the wind blew through shrubs on the edge of the beach.

“Where are we?” Elvis asked.

Bower had no answers.

Waves crashed, breaking on a distant reef. She could hear the sound of an engine in the lull between the rhythmic surge of the waves, a motorboat was racing toward them.

Elvis stood, helping her to her feet. She dusted the sand off her trousers.

“Hey,” Elvis said, staring up at the stars.

Above them, a floater rose into the air, returning to the mothership visible high above the stratosphere. Already, the floater’s tentacles looked distant. From what she could tell, the alien vessel had to be several thousand feet in the air and climbing fast.

She turned, looking around.

They were on an island. Tall palms stretched along a beautiful beach, curving away from them into the distance. The sand was pristine, as though no human had ever set foot in this paradise.

“There’s a ship,” Elvis said. “I think it’s the Lawrence.”

A calm lagoon opened out beside them. Beyond the lagoon, breakers crashed on the outer reef. Sitting on the horizon was the distinct dark silhouette of a warship. Two inflatable boats raced into the lagoon with flashing lights marking their position in the night.

“We’re home.” It was all Bower could bring herself to say. Physically, mentally and emotionally, she was exhausted.

“Everything’s going to be OK. We’re going to make it,” Elvis said, putting his arm around her.

Bower hoped he was right. She couldn’t help but feel this was the end.

# Epilogue

Dr. Elizabeth Bower stood beside the United Nations building in front of a statue dedicated to the premise of peace on Earth. Seagulls floated on the breeze behind her, drifting above New York's East River.

She couldn't get used to reading from a teleprompter, but her producer said she looked natural. As she came to the end of her speech, Bower smiled graciously for the camera, watching as it panned to capture the freeze-frame action depicted by the statue.

How remarkable, she thought, looking up at the statue as the producer called, "Cut."

She was standing before a bronze statue of a man beating a sword into a plowshare. The weather had long since rendered his muscular frame a pale green color, but his physique spoke of strength, discipline and determination. He stood mid-stride, his hammer raised high above his head, poised for another blow.

Was it irony, she wondered, that such a testimony could come from a communist country at the height of the Cold War? At that time, fingers on both sides had been poised over the mythical red button that could have destroyed civilization. Times had changed, but the message was the same: reason was mightier than the sword, strength could be a catalyst for peace.

Humanity was changing, but not because of any alien intervention, not out of fear, but out of a desire to grow up. Whatever that alien species was, regardless of where they originated, reason had convinced them mankind deserved a second-chance. Reason had given them hope.

Perhaps they'd seen statues like this one, Bower wondered. Perhaps they understood that, even in the darkest hour, reason shone as a beacon of light for humanity.

Dr. Ambar walked up to her. Bower hadn't seen him for months.

"Liz," he said warmly, shaking her outstretched hand with both of his hands. "It's good to see you."

"It's good to see you too," she replied, smiling.

She seemed to do a lot of smiling these days. Apparently that was part of the job description of UN ambassador to the stars. It was a figurative title. There was no real representation. There had not been any contact with the aliens since the mothership had left orbit barely an hour after Elvis and Bower found themselves on the northern beach of a small island off the coast of Madagascar.

The world was still obsessed with celebrities. A lot may have changed since the aliens came, but that particular fascination seemed

only to have grown, and the UN Secretary-General had used Bower's popularity to drive forward dialogue between nations. What her personal presence meant was somewhat lost on Bower as she didn't see herself as overly important, but she was important to others. Change was in the wind. These days, she smiled so much her cheeks hurt.

"Can we talk?" Dr. Ambar asked.

"Yes," Bower said, turning and walking away from the film crew as they packed up their equipment.

"Are you in touch with Elvis?"

"From time to time," she said. "He's been seconded by SETI as part of a global awareness campaign and spends even more time on the road than me. He's so gregarious and outgoing. The NASA guys love him, especially when he strikes up an old Elvis Presley classic at the end of a rally."

Dr. Ambar smiled.

"I've got something I'd like you to see," He said, pulling a photograph from a plain manila folder and handing it to her.

Bower looked at the glossy sheet of paper in front of her as she walked along the path by the river. The image was grainy. A moon orbited Saturn, just outside one of the major rings.

"I don't get it. What am I looking for?"

Dr. Ambar grinned, handing her another photo that showed the same image enlarged, but the resolution was so poor the enlargement was pointless.

"I thought NASA's budget had been increased," she said. "Surely you can afford digital photos on a tablet."

"Ah," Dr. Ambar replied, with a subtle tone in his voice that suggested he was uttering a secret. "These images are far too important. Even the digital versions are individually tracked."

He was smiling like a kid in a candy store. Bower could see he expected her to notice something, but she thought the telescope lens needed cleaning.

"There," he said, pointing at the picture as they paused.

"Is that…"

"Yes."

Bower stepped off the path, walking out of the shade of a tree to allow the sunlight to highlight the subtleties in the image.

"Are you sure about this?" Bower asked.

"Yes," Dr. Ambar replied, walking beside her.

"But how? Why?" she asked, not sure which question she wanted answered first.

"It's been six months," he said.

"I don't understand?" Bower replied. "I thought they left our solar

system. We watched them go. We tracked them as far as Neptune."

"We did," Dr. Ambar agreed.

"So what does this mean?"

"Interesting you should ask," he replied. "Given your experience with the aliens, we were hoping you might be able to provide some insight."

Bower thought for a second.

"Which moon is this?"

"Enceladus. It's an ice moon. We think there's an ocean down there beneath the frozen surface."

Dr. Ambar handed her some more photos, saying, "Their activity doesn't match anything we saw when they first approached Earth. This mothership is in a highly eccentric orbit around Saturn, reaching out as far as the distant moon Titan, while never approaching closer than the orbit of Enceladus and the outer rings as she swings around the planet. The thing is, their free-fall is exquisitely timed so as to pass within a thousand miles of each of these moons on each of their orbits."

"I don't get it?" she said.

"They're buzzing these two moons," Dr. Ambar replied. "Titan orbits Saturn once every sixteen days. Enceladus orbits once every day and a half. The alien craft is, in effect, conducting a fly-by of Titan and Enceladus roughly once a week. It's almost as though she were chasing them."

Bower was silent, lost in thought.

"There hasn't been any surface activity on Enceladus, at least none we can detect. Although they could have floaters on Titan and we wouldn't know it. Whatever the case, they've been at this for a while, probably for a couple of months before we noticed them. As best we understand this, though, the alien activity around Saturn commenced well after their encounter with Earth, and with a different mothership."

"Are there any spacecraft that can take a closer look?" Bower asked.

"We're trying to re-task Cassini. She went quiet several years ago, but if we can coax her back online we'll get a better look. Personally, I don't like our chances."

Dr. Ambar examined one of the photos as he stood beside her, saying, "Can you think of any reason they'd be out there?"

"There's only one thing that interests them," Bower replied. "Life. If they're exploring Enceladus and Titan, then they've found life down there."

"That's what I thought," Dr. Ambar replied. "But NASA isn't convinced. Why linger? Why sit in such an eccentric orbit? It's almost

like they want us to see them."

"It's like they're waiting," Bower said.

"Waiting for what?"

"For us." Bower handed the photos back to him, saying, "It's an invitation. They found life in our backyard and they're waiting for us to join them."

The Beginning

# Afterword

I'd like to thank the following people for their support in writing Xenophobia. In no particular order, thanks to Commander Mike Morrissey (USA, Retired) for his assistance in the military aspects of this novel, my unofficial editor Brian Wells for his patience, Jae Lee for convincing me to delete 25,000 words in the rewrite, John Walker (Autodesk/Fourmilab) for his keen eye and assistance with editing, Ellen Campbell for following up on everyone else, and my ever encouraging wife, Fiona, for putting up with my crazy ideas.

The cover art for Xenophobia has been graciously provided by Jason Gurley.

The reference to the Elvis Presley song, Viva Las Vegas, was deliberately crafted in such a way as to avoid any copyright infringement with none of the actual song lyrics being used. Copyright for Viva Las Vegas is held by Mort Shuman Songs and Pomus Songs Inc. In the same way, the only reference to any other songs performed by Elvis Presley are their titles.

The major premise within Xenophobia is that the way we treat each other on Earth will impact how we approach an intelligent alien species. In other words, if we can't get it together between ourselves, we're not going to get on well with the neighbors.

There are no easy answers to the dilemma of xenophobia, as is borne out by the social, religious and cultural clashes that occur in regions like Africa and Central Asia, or in Chicago and London for that matter.

Here in Australia, elections always seem to herald a fresh round of xenophobia as politicians seize on the fear of foreigners and the bogus concept of "border security" to secure votes. With 170,000 immigrants arriving each year, a few thousand arriving by boat makes no difference. The only real concern is that migration through unauthorized channels is a dangerous proposition. Asylum seekers with a genuine case should be accepted regardless of whether they arrive by boat, by plane or on a sleigh from the North Pole, but fear is seldom rational, and that's the perspective I've tried to capture in Xenophobia.

Any visiting alien would be astonished by the interconnectivity and interdependencies of life on Earth, and this concept extends beyond what we've dared imagine until recent times.

The science of biology is continuing to learn more about the intricacies of human life. One aspect touched on in this novel is the concept of the microbiome, or the influence of the microorganisms inhabiting the human body. Technically, they are distinctly separate

lifeforms, but in practice they have a profound influence on our lives, one that has parallels to our genome, having a profound impact on our health and physiology. There are ten times as many microbial cells in and on the body as there are human cells, although they are small in size by comparison. Some consider the microbiome as vital as any other organ of the body. If you're interested in learning more about this fascinating, emerging field, check out Jonathan Eisen's blog.

We live on a remarkable planet. For us, life is commonplace, but as best we understand the universe at this point, life is astonishingly rare. Hollywood has aliens attacking Earth, plundering mineral resources or sucking water from our oceans, but the reality is, these commodities are found in absurd abundance throughout space.

If an intelligent alien species ever does come across Earth, the jewel they will seek is one we can freely share: Life.

From an alien's perspective, it would be fascinating to explore the diversity of life on Earth. They'll want to understand our evolutionary pedigree and will probably spend more time in museums and universities than they ever will at the White House.

Any alien intelligence that reaches Earth is going to be far more interested in our art, music and literature than they will be in world domination. You won't find them buzzing around in flying saucers making crop circles, they'll be on archeological excavations, or conducting biodiversity surveys of our jungles and rainforests, or helping out on a paleontological dig, as that's where the true riches of Earth lie. Life is the greatest treasure.

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* * *

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* * *

***Galactic Exploration*** is a compilation of four closely related science fiction stories following the exploration of the Milky Way by the spaceships *Serengeti, Savannah* and *The Rift Valley*. These three generational star ships are manned by clones and form part of the ongoing search for intelligent extra-terrestrial life. With the *Serengeti* heading out above the plane of the Milky Way, the *Savannah* exploring the outer reaches of the galaxy, and *The Rift Valley* investigating possible alien signals within the galactic core, this story examines the Rare Earth Hypothesis from a number of different angles.

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* * *

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Feedback will carry you from the desolate, windswept coastline of North Korea to the bustling streets of New York and on into the depths of space as you journey to the outer edge of our solar system looking for answers.

* * *

***Little Green Men*** is a tribute to the works of Philip K. Dick, hailing back to classic science fiction stories of the 1950s.

The crew of the *Dei Gratia* set down on a frozen planet and are attacked by little green men. Chief Science Officer David Michaels

struggles with the impossible situation unfolding around him as the crew are murdered one by one. With the engines offline and power fading, he races against time to understand this mysterious threat and escape the planet alive.

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